Wait and Hope

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Wait and Hope

by mightbewriting

Summary

A Very Important Note!
At some point in the not too distant future, The World of Wait and Hope will be removed from Ao3. As soon as I have a specific date, I'll be sure to update! In the meantime, please feel free to download copies of the series to save for yourself if you'd like to have them! You can find me (and more information on my traditional publishing journey!) on instagram as @amandagaylewrites. I owe this story and the fandom who has loved it a tremendous amount of gratitude, and I cannot wait for y'all to see it in its next iteration.

“Harry,” Hermione began, voice very controlled, but she could feel the blade of panic slicing at her vocal cords. “Why was Draco Malfoy just screaming bloody murder about his,” and the word almost strangled her as she said it, “wife?”

[In which Hermione loses the last six year's worth of her memories, including the entirety of her relationship and marriage to Draco.]

Notes

Part ONE of FIVE in the World of Wait and Hope series.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1: Hermione Granger-Malfoy

Chapter Notes

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“All human wisdom is contained in these two words— ”Wait and Hope.”

— Alexandre Dumas, The Count of Monte Cristo

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January

Bright lights and lime green.

Hermione grappled with those fleeting observations as she struggled towards consciousness. Her head alternated between mind-shattering throbs and stabs of shooting pain so intense she saw lights behind her eyelids.

She could hardly consider her circumstances with such brain-melting pain poking and prodding at her gray matter. A flash of lime green and something vile slid down her throat. Sweet relief; the pain ebbed.

A soft voice. “Jenkins, lower the lights again, we’re close.”

The bright lights barely dimmed.

“Hermione, if you can hear me, you’re exiting a magically induced coma. You’ve been in an accident but you are very safe and in a controlled environment, try to remain calm as you come out of it.”

Hermione decided that she liked the sound of the soft voice: velvet against her eardrums. But she liked what the voice said much less.

Magically induced coma? Accident? Did that mean she was at St. Mungo's? Of course: lime green robes. The color palette made sense.

She tried to force her eyes open again; they fluttered under the attacking lights. She squeezed them shut, sucked in a breath, and opened them again. A world of color and light and blur greeted her.

A figure stood nearby. She couldn't make out any details, except that they were person-shaped and dressed in lime green robes. Almost certainly St. Mungo's, then.

"My name is Healer Lucas," the figure above her said. Hermione was struck by how odd it was not to see someone's lips when they spoke. She blinked rapidly, trying to erase the cloudy filter from her eyes. "I'm here with my apprentice, Healer Jenkins. We're the healers assigned to your case."

Hermione tried to swallow. Her throat caught part way through the motion, her only relief from the painful dryness being the potion they'd dose her with.

Catching the motion, Healer Lucas offered her water.

Hermione had never tasted something so refreshing in her life.

"Hermione, we need to perform some initial diagnostics now that you're conscious," Healer Lucas pressed gently. "If at any point you need a break or feel too unwell to continue, just let me know."

Hermione didn't trust her own voice just yet, so she nodded. Healer Lucas procured a parchment out of nowhere.

"Do you know your full name?"

Oh, gods. How bad was it that they needed to ask her her own name?

"Hermione." She gave a small cough and tried again. "Hermione Jean Granger."

Healer Lucas made a note.

"And what year is it?"

Hermione felt an unfamiliar rush of hot panic fluttering inside her.

She normally had control over her nerves; she didn't rattle easily. She was a tried and true Gryffindor to her core. But she felt something dreadful lingering.

"It's 2001."

Healer Lucas made another note.

"And who is Minister for Magic?"

"Kingsley Shacklebolt."

Another note. Hermione couldn't take it anymore.

"What happened to me?" she asked, her voice cracking. "How bad was it? Why do you need to ask such basic questions?" The fluttering of anxiety swelled from her stomach to her chest. Her throat tightened. Her insides roiled.

Quite patiently, Healer Lucas set her parchment aside.

"These diagnostic questions are essential for establishing a baseline."

"A baseline for what?" Hermione asked, her voice breaking into something shrill. Her heart hammered behind her ribs. "A first year could answer those questions correctly. Let's skip to the relevant information and tell me what's going on."

Her demand probably sounded petulant, but Hermione felt like her chest might crack open from the panic.

Healer Lucas took a deep breath. Inhaled through her nose. Exhaled through her mouth.

"You need to breathe," she said. Hermione tried, truly she did. "And while a first year may be able to answer those questions correctly, you did not."

Hermione sputtered her exhale.

"What?"

"You did not answer them correctly."

The anxiety vanished, leaving in its place something cold and vacant. Terror.

“Which one.”

“Two of the three, my dear. But we’re prepared for this-”

“What do you mean two of the three? Which two?” Hermione didn’t even recognize her own voice, so cold, so low, so unlike her own cadence. “I know my own name,” she insisted.

“Let’s circle back to that,” Healer Lucas said. “You’ve had a very traumatic brain injury, and memory loss is a potential side effect we’ve been preparing for.”

“Memory loss?” The words felt leaden on Hermione’s tongue.

“We hope only temporary. The magical mind is a powerful and adaptive thing, but it can also be unpredictable. Jenkins is already working on your treatment plan.” Jenkins waved tentatively to her from his place near the door.

“Let’s start with what you got right. Kingsley Shacklebolt is indeed the Minister for Magic,” healer Lucas started, her voice ever-so-gentle. “However, it isn’t the year 2001. It’s 2007.”

Hermione’s stomach flipped, the vacant cold of terror clashing with a renewed surge of hot anxiety, two sides of the same terrible fear-tainted coin. Six years? *Six years.* That was—that was utterly impossible. Hermione’s head throbbed as it whirred into action, trying to recall anything and everything she’d ever read about the brain: psychology, magical comas, head trauma. All of it.

“And while you’re partially right about your name being Hermione Jean Granger, you hyphenated last year-"

A roar from beyond the door interrupted the placidity of Healer Lucas turning Hermione’s world upside down.

“Where the *fuck* is my wife?”

Muffled voices. A thud against the door. Hermione and Jenkins jumped at the same time.

“Get off me Potter, I’m not waiting-"

Harry? Hermione’s fear shrank at the promise of having Harry here for her. It would be okay.

“Thirty seven hours Potter-"

More muffled voices. Some shouting from further away. Another thud against the door.

“She’s my wife!”

The door flew open; Jenkins jumped out of his seat.

Harry Potter stood in the doorway, nose bleeding. His arms wrapped around a struggling Draco Malfoy, who had blood on his otherwise crisp white shirt and his wand drawn, having evidently just about blown the door off its hinges.

More lime green robes rushed to the doorway, grappling at the blond man who’d clearly lost his mind.

“She’s my fucking wife!” Malfoy snarled as the other healers pulled him away, still screaming down the hallway until a flash of red light brought silence. *Stunned.*

Harry sheepishly met her gaze, blood trickling down his face. He didn’t bother wiping it away.

“Uh. Hi, Hermione.” He glanced at the healers in her room, as if seeking direction or permission to speak to her.

“Harry,” Hermione began, voice very controlled, but she could feel the blade of panic slicing at her vocal cords. “Why was Draco Malfoy just screaming bloody murder about his,” and the word almost strangled her as she said it, “wife?”

His green eyes blew wide.

Healer Lucas pinched the bridge of her nose, clearly displeased with the recent series of events.

“He was referring to you, my dear,” she said. “That was the other question you got wrong. Your name is Hermione Jean Granger-Malfoy.”

Hermione had to be sedated again.

—

The next time Hermione woke, she begged her healers for a better explanation, her brain burning with questions. They had no real answers to offer. They sat with her, irritatingly calm, explaining her diagnosis, her care plan, her limits, and what she could expect in the coming months. They tempered her hope with maybes, possibilities, and potentials. They spoke of no absolutes and offered very little confidence, leaving Hermione with the sense that when she got her memories back, *if* she got her memories back, it would be a long road and a difficult one to navigate.

“The brain and its magic are very fragile,” Healer Lucas had said, in yet another attempt at offering a satisfactory explanation.

“I’m quite aware of that Healer Lucas. As I’ve told you, I have extensive experience with Obliviation and its reversal, I don’t see how this is any—"

“Mrs. Granger-Malfoy—"

“Don’t call me that,” Hermione snapped with a visceral recoil.

“Hermione,” Healer Lucas corrected, employing a most calm and controlled tone. “As *I* have told you, your injury was the result of contact with an unknown dark artifact from your work at the Ministry, which makes your treatment plan entirely unprecedented. Time and patience are our best allies in this.”

Hermione huffed, frustration rising. “If I could take a closer look at my scans, perhaps pull a few books to—"

Healer Lucas lifted a hand to stop her; they’d had this conversation at least twice in the last two hours.

“Hermione, you are the patient, not the caregiver. I appreciate your intellect and your tenacity, I do, but I must ask that you defer to the professional opinions of those of us who are trying to help you.”

Hermione pressed her lips together, smothering her rebuttal. She knew a lost fight when she saw one.

“Rest for now,” Healer Lucas said, standing. “We’ll see if any memories happen to resurface and we’ll begin planning for your discharge.”

Begrudgingly, Hermione slept, caught on the downward crest of her wave of adrenaline, crashing her brain to a near stall.

When she came to again, Ginny sat at her bedside.

“Hey,” Ginny whispered. “How are you?”

Groggy. Tired. Very, very confused. Hermione’s face must have said enough. Ginny scooted her seat closer to the edge of the bed, chair scraping against laminate floors. Carefully, and slow enough that Hermione could pull away if she wanted to, Ginny reached out and held Hermione’s hand in her own.

“I spoke to your Healer just a little while ago, they’re going to discharge you later this afternoon,” Ginny said, her voice quiet. “Apart from your missing time, she says you’re doing really well physically. I have a whole packet of information for you in my bag.” She pulled out a folder of information, presumably her treatment plan, along with a couple week's worth of Daily Prophets for Hermione to read.

Hermione screwed her eyes shut, sorting through all the new information she’d been flooded with over the last twenty four hours she’d been mostly conscious. Opening her eyes again, she examined her friend.

Ginny didn’t look much different than how Hermione remembered, but she carried herself differently. There was a subtle bit more command in the set of her shoulders, in the line of her posture, and something stiffened and tired around her edges. Her face looked almost exactly the same as when Hermione had last seen it in 2001, apart from the dark circles under her eyes.

“Ginny, you look…” Hermione began, not really knowing how to go on.

“Exhausted. I look exhausted,” Ginny supplied with a forced laugh. “I have two children under the age of three and a best friend in the hospital. I don’t think I’ve slept in years.” She gave Hermione’s hand a squeeze. “I’ve been so worried about you.”

Hermione stared, her world spinning for a moment, latching onto Ginny's words.

“Children?” she asked.

Ginny’s eyes widened, her grip on Hermione’s hand tightened. “Oh—right, I’m sorry. Don’t worry about that for now, we’re supposed to reintroduce information slowly. Try not to overwhelm you.” Ginny offered a smile, kind but wary.

“You have children,” Hermione repeated. “And I don’t remember. Wait." Another lurch in Hermione’s mind. “Whose are they—are they Harry’s—your kids, I mean?”

Ginny laughed again, a genuine, tinkling sound. “Yes, they’re Harry’s. We married in January of 2003. Our anniversary was last week. You were my maid of honor.”

Grief suddenly swelled in Hermione, heart aching for a memory she did not know.

“Married. Kids.” Hermione felt choked, short of breath. “This is so much to wrap my head around, Gin.”

“I know,” Ginny said and then grimaced. “Well, I don’t, actually. I can’t possibly know what you must feel like. But I’m here for you. I came because the boys and I thought it would be best if I were the one to give you the basics before your release. There’s some baseline information about your life that you should know before—"

“Before I have to go live it?”

Ginny pressed her lips together, considering her words. “In a sense, yes.”

“Please tell me the Granger-Malfoy bit has been an elaborate joke,” Hermione said, her voice tight.

Ginny redirected the conversation rather than answer. “Healer Lucas told me you’ve been asking for Ron."

Hermione’s stomach dropped. She had. Pointlessly she assumed, given the context clues.

“We didn’t think it would be a smart idea for him to visit you. He agreed. He sends his best, though. He’s been just as worried as the rest of us.”

“But I’m not his—we’re not—together anymore?” The words taste sour in her mouth, tinged with bile.

Ginny’s face fell.

“Healer Lucas also said your most recent memories are from April of 2001?” Ginny asked carefully.

“You aren’t actually answering any of my questions, Ginny.”

Hermione couldn't quite tell if she was more annoyed or anxious.

"You and Ron," Ginny began. "You broke up at the end of 2001, and it was the right decision, Hermione. You both think so now."

"Forgive me for not having the same frame of reference as you do," Hermione snapped, annoyance winning out.

"It really was for the best, you're both much happier now," she insisted. Hermione did her best to control the welling of tears pooling on her lower lids, a blink away from spilling. "And no, the Granger-Malfoy bit isn't a joke," Ginny continued. "You and the ferret are obnoxiously perfect together, and don't you dare tell him I said that."

"Referring to my alleged husband as a mustelid doesn't exactly instill confidence, Gin. Additionally, I have no interest in telling Malfoy anything whatsoever."

"About that," Ginny started, taking on a defensive sort of posture. "Harry and I are perfectly willing to let you stay at Grimmauld Place with us and the kids, but there will be a lot of stimulus with the three of us plus a toddler and a newborn, and, well, pointy is your husband and the healers think it's best you be around familiar things and people so—"

"Are you really suggesting I go live with *Malfoy?"* Hermione nearly shrieked.

"You already live with him," Ginny hedged.

"I—well, shit. You can't be serious, Ginny. We're talking about *Malfoy,* here. He could curse me or carve more slurs into—" Hermione broke off, holding up her left arm for reference, but finding the familiar 'mudblood' carving notably absent.

Ginny's face softened, some of her tense worry melting away. "Trust me, Hermione. Of everyone you know, probably myself and Harry included, Draco Malfoy is the least likely to cause you any kind of harm."

Hermione stared back at her unmarked arm. She'd spent two years trying to erase the hateful letters Bellatrix Lestrange left there and had only just come to terms with the fact that it didn't seem likely they could ever be healed or removed. Ginny squeezed her hand.

"He invented a potion to remove it," Ginny said, nodding at

Hermione's bare arm. "He gave it to you the Christmas before you started dating."

Unbelievable. It was actually unbelievable. All of it.

But when Harry showed up as Hermione was being released and reiterated Ginny's recommendation that she stay at her own flat, which she happened to share Draco Malfoy, Hermione reluctantly agreed. Because Hermione knew how to listen to logic; she knew how to accept the recommendations of her closest friends and the professionals in her medical care, much as she may dislike it. She trusted Harry. She trusted Ginny. And that would have to be enough, even if she didn't trust Malfoy.

—

Hermione was in a daze by the time Harry opened the door to what he insisted was her flat with Malfoy. *Malfoy.* Who was also there, walking carefully a few paces behind them, looking like a quiet ghost of a man. A far cry from the unhinged version of him she'd seen at St. Mungo's, but still just as unsettling.

Hermione distracted herself by watching the wards to the flat greet her without issue: a shimmering sensation of familiar magic against her skin. Part of her hoped they'd reject her, keep her from entering because that would mean they weren't keyed to her, that she had no reason to be there.

Harry had already walked through ahead of her. Malfoy trailed somewhere behind.

"You can get through the wards here?" she asked Harry, trying to cling to the practical, reasonable, logical things she could wrap her mind around.

"Malfoy gets tired of answering the floo while you're working and I visit a lot, so..." he trailed off.

"How trusting of him," Hermione mused, trying to imagine a world where Draco Malfoy willingly gave Harry Potter free access to his home.

Unless this wasn't actually Draco Malfoy's flat and this was actually some sort of strange, elaborate ruse. Hermione tried to banish that intrusive thought; it wasn't logical, no matter how much easier it would have been. She'd seen her medical records, read the Daily Prophets Ginny brought her, too many things would have to have been coordinated for a ruse this complex. Unless…

No.

Any doubt that this flat belonged to Draco Malfoy vanished when the door swung open.

It was a small space, really rather cramped, and certainly much smaller than any place she could imagine a Malfoy inhabiting. But the living room that greeted Hermione was decorated like a gods damned Slytherin common room, so there was the nail in that coffin.

"A green velvet couch?" she asked, caught somewhere between a shriek and exasperation. Of all the things. "Really?"

She turned to face Malfoy for the first time since she'd been released from St. Mungo's.

He looked startled at first, the worry carved into his features transforming into confusion, then he broke out into a peal of laughter.

Hermione whirled. Harry had nearly doubled over with laughter as well. And Hermione found herself sandwiched between her best friend and his worst enemy, evidently sharing a hilarious inside joke. She turned a few more times, torn as to which insufferable prat deserved her ire the most.

She honed in on Malfoy, who, she realized, she'd never seen him laugh like this, not with such an unguarded joy. The corners of his eyes crinkled, his white, perfectly straight teeth on full display. He had a dimple on the left side of his mouth.

She put her hands on her hips. This was not the appropriate time for any wizard, best friend, alleged husband, or otherwise, to be laughing at her.

"Well?" she asked, awaiting her explanation.

Malfoy sobered, straightening, twitches of laughter still pulling at his features. Something else on his face softened as he met her eyes for

what felt like the first time in Hermione's entire life. For a moment, it felt like she'd stepped into a whirlpool.

"I can't even begin to explain what a nightmare the past three days have been, Hermione," he said. She recoiled at the sound of her first name being said in his voice. She was Granger. He was Malfoy. "But that, Merlin, that right there gives me hope. But the story of that sofa is definitely one for another time."

"Can I be there for it?" Harry asked, wiping tears from the corners of his eyes, not even bothering to suppress his chuckling. "*Please,* can I be there for it? Ginny too? We could send invitations. I'm sure Neville would want to see it. Hell, send your Friday night gang invites too; we can make a whole evening of it."

"Sod off, Potter," Malfoy said. Somehow it was the nicest insult Hermione had ever heard him hurl.

Hermione continued to stand there, hands on her hips, half expecting one of them to finally explain. When neither did, she huffed past Harry and fully into the living room of the home that was meant to be hers.

But everywhere she looked she saw Malfoy. Crammed into the small sitting room was the enormous tufted green velvet sofa, not one, but *two* coffee tables wedged side by side, a couple of additional end tables, a cozy looking leather armchair, another, much less comfortable looking leather wingback, and all of it in some version of black, green, or silver. It was honestly a little bit nauseating.

The only bit of herself she could find in the crowded space was the hundreds of books stacked onto every last horizontal surface in addition to the overflowing built-in bookcases lining an entire wall.

"Are we," and she cringed at the plural pronoun, "moving or redecorating or something?"

Harry nearly choked and Malfoy shot him a dark look.

"Sorry," Harry apologized. "I don't really know if I should laugh or cry. I think I'm coping with laughter."

Hermione didn't have it in her to be annoyed that her question went unanswered; she was more concerned with the protective look that shot across Malfoy's features.

Malfoy broke his annoyed stare at Harry and looked at her, face immediately warming. He shrugged. “We have a lot of books and not enough space for them.”

“And all this furniture?” she asked.

“We have a lot of that, too.” He didn’t elaborate further.

The three of them stood in an uncomfortable silence. Hermione continued to examine the space around her, peering into the adjacent kitchen. Malfoy stood very still, watching her like she was a skittish creature that might scurry away at any moment. Harry had started nervously raking a hand through his messy hair.

Harry broke the tension first. “I should go,” he said. “Ginny’s expecting me soon.”

Hermione turned to him, feeling her eyes widen. He was leaving her alone with Malfoy? Of course he was; she knew he would. But it seemed far too soon.

Ignoring what could have only been a look of abject horror on her face, Harry stepped forward and gave her a hug. “You’re gonna be fine ‘Mione,” he whispered before releasing her.

“Floo if you need anything,” Harry said, turning to Malfoy. The boys—men—nodded to each other before Harry helped himself to a handful of Floo powder from the mantel and was swept away in a green flash.

Silence enveloped the room once again, until Malfoy let out a long breath.

“Can I give you a tour?” he asked.

—

The tour was as uncomfortable as it was unnerving. Hermione didn’t know how to interact with Malfoy in a way that didn’t involve, at the very least, thinly veiled hostility.

But he seemed perfectly cordial, afraid of her almost, granting her ample space as he walked her through the kitchen, showing her where things were before she even had the chance to ask about them. He

pointed out the shelf with her brand of tea, where her secret stash of sweets was kept, and where his favorite candies were that she was informed she was not allowed to have.

It almost sounded like a joke, the corners of his eyes crinkling with the happiness of some memory she didn't share.

"And this is Crook's treat jar," he said, motioning towards a small jar on the counter.

"Crookshanks?" she asked, the first words she'd spoken to him since Harry left. She felt breathless for a moment. Her cat was still alive. He would be old, certainly, but Hermione had just assumed since no one mentioned him that he must have died in the six years of memory she'd lost. That, and she'd had quite a few other things demanding her immediate attention.

Malfoy smiled at her and Hermione had to look away. It was too warm, too kind, too unlike Malfoy.

"I closed him in the bedroom before we came to pick you up. I didn't want to overwhelm you," he said quietly.

"Where?" she asked.

"This way," Malfoy offered, walking her down the long hallway between the living room and the kitchen. He gestured to a door on the left. "That's the bathroom." He pointed to another door on the right. "That used to be our guest room but we did one too many experiments in there. Between your confiscated artifacts and my potions, well. It doesn't work quite right anymore."

"What doesn't work right?" Hermione asked, finding herself pulled towards the door. A hand shot out to block her path, but still giving her plenty of personal space.

"The whole room doesn't work right. Even time's a little funny in there," Malfoy reached a hand to his hair, longer than she remembered it being. His face contorted for a moment, as if his explanation caused him pain. "Potter broke down the door once because we'd been in there for two days and didn't even know it. We've been thinking about making the whole room unplottable."

"Really?" she asked, curiosity piqued even higher, but immediately regretted it when she saw Malfoy begin unbuttoning the top of his shirt.

She spun, absolutely uninterested in seeing Malfoy's chest.

“Sorry.” His voice sounded behind her, an edge of exasperation bleeding through. “I was just showing you my collar.”

Tentatively, Hermione turned back to see he had the top of his shirt stretched towards his left side, revealing a jagged scar running across his collarbone, still pink. It looked newly healed.

“The room flipped us, as in turned us upside down and then back again, when the boy wonder broke in. A cauldron landed on my chest, broke my collarbone in three places. Had to Skele-Gro my entire sternum. Whatever we did, we broke the room.” He said the last part with a fond smile. Hermione couldn’t help but wonder if he was a little proud of what they’d managed. “But you didn’t want us using it anymore, and especially with you not remembering everything we had in there, I have to agree.”

“When did that happen?” she asked, still propelled by curiosity.

“Earlier this month.”

“Oh,” was all Hermione had to say in response. She couldn’t help but eye the handle, fingers itching to reach out and explore whatever lay within. She resisted.

Instead, she brought her attention to the door at the end of the hallway. “Crookshanks?”

Malfoy nodded, deft hands redoing the buttons of his shirt as he led the way towards the last room.

Hermione scooped up her mostly orange companion as soon as the door swung open.

“Oh, Crooks you’ve gotten so grey,” she whispered to the half-kneazle, burying her face in his fur.

“He’s doing alright for an old guy,” Malfoy said from behind her. He hadn’t entered the room. Instead, he leaned against the frame and watched her with worry lines creasing his forehead again. He had his arms crossed in front of him, sleeves rolled to the elbows, looking as casual as one could in whatever expensive brand of dress shirt he wore. With a guilty bolt in her gut, Hermione admitted to herself that he was quite handsome, questionable life choices notwithstanding. He’d also been very patient. Hermione cleared her throat, swallowing

her pride.

“Thank you for being kind, Malfoy,” she said.

She’d intended for that to be a nice thing to say, but he frowned, face twisting before he caught himself. His features neutralized, the light behind his eyes slipped into something distant.

“Of course,” he said. “I’ll be sleeping on the sofa. It’s already getting quite late, so—uh. The right side of the bed is yours.”

He didn’t wait for her to respond. He just closed the door with a soft click. It was a full minute before she heard the sound of his footsteps retreating. Hermione knew because she’d been holding her breath and couldn’t figure out why.

—

The bedroom felt just as cramped and foreign to Hermione as the rest of the flat had. The room was crammed with furniture much like the others had been. An enormous bed, far too big for the space, was draped in burgundy sheets, unmade. There were two more overflowing bookcases nearby, an armoire, a separate dresser, two nightstands, a settee (honestly? A settee?), and a door to what Hermione assumed was the closet.

Crookshanks grew restless in her grip so Hermione released him. She walked towards the dresser and braved a look in the attached mirror.

Six years.

Six years, from a distance, looked like nothing at all. But up close—

She had a couple of fine lines just starting to carve a path of laughter at the corner of her eyes.

She had more variation in the texture and tone of her skin, a little more fullness in her cheeks.

She had longer hair, weighing down her curls and keeping them somewhat under control.

She had a tiny silver scar curving along her right eyebrow, almost

invisible, but certainly a new addition to her face.

She also had dark circles under the eyes, but time had nothing to do with those.

Hermione ran a hand through her hair. It *felt* the same. She felt the same. But she couldn't deny that something in her reflection said late twenties, not early twenties. She sighed, resignation sinking into her bones. She was exhausted.

She opened one of the dresser drawers and then immediately slammed it shut again. She did not need to know if Malfoy was a boxer or briefs kind of guy (though, evidently the answer was boxer-brief). She braved another drawer, more men's clothes. When she finally found women's clothing, she blanched.

The clothes Ginny had brought her to the hospital were completely normal, up to and including the simple cotton bra and panties. The undergarments in the drawer in front of her were much more elaborate than what she was used to: silks, laces, and tiny scraps of fabric she wouldn't dare wear.

She closed the drawer and opted for the closet, a silent prayer on her lips for a flannel pajama set.

Her prayers went unanswered. A barrage of black, white, and gray greeted her on the left side of the closet: men's trousers, shirts, jumpers, and dress robes. Despite herself, Hermione snorted at the few hints of green interspersed amongst the monochrome. Slytherin loyalty evidently still ran deep.

On the right side closet, color assaulted her: dresses, skirts, blouses, trousers, even a couple of gowns crammed into the overflowing space. And not a flannel pajama in sight. Hermione didn't wear these kinds of clothes, not the racy underwear in the drawers nor the oddly formal range before her. She wore practical clothing, she enjoyed a basic denim, a cotton shirt, and a cozy jumper.

Hermione ground her teeth together and left the closet with a frustrated huff. She had two options, ask Malfoy where her sleeping things were kept or sleep in what she had on. And really, that wasn't a choice at all.

She regarded the bed, eyeing the stacks of books on each nightstand. Malfoy said the right side of the bed was hers, but curiosity drove her to the left, wanting to know what books he had stacked there. On the

nightstand sat a potions periodical, two mastery level potions textbooks, a book on wand lore that looked genuinely fascinating, and *The Count of Monte Cristo.*

Her brows furrowed at the sight of the muggle literature, breath catching as she reached for it. Hermione couldn't control the tiny spasm in her hand as she flipped the book open to the inside cover. Her heart twisted. Printed in the carefully practiced script of a proud eleven year old was her own name. Her parents had given her the book for Christmas when she was eleven, and it had been one of her favorites ever since. She'd loved it at eleven because it was a big book, the kind of book adults were impressed she could read. She loved it as she grew older for the intricacies of the story, and for the fond memories she had of that last Christmas with her parents before magic became the center of her world. It was a memory of a simpler time, not necessarily better, but simpler.

She put the book back and retreated to the other side of the bed. Her nightstand held a book on recent transfiguration advances, something on dark artifacts that looked straight out of the restricted section, a few novels, and a planner embossed with her initials. Or rather, embossed with HJGM. She considered the offensive combination of gold leaf letters as she peeled off her jeans, unhooked her bra from under her cotton tee, and climbed into bed. Crookshanks immediately joined her.

She reached for the planner, feeling strangely at odds with herself. She found the page for the day before the accident. The box was littered with notes in what was indisputably her own handwriting. She'd made a list for anything and everything: read Neville's new article, grab take away on the way home, prep for 11 o'clock meeting, check how Draco's scar is healing, and so on and so forth for an entire page of her life she'd lived less than a week ago and had no recollection of.

She pressed the open book to her chest, gripping it with clenched hands. She hurt, a pain stowed away inside her chest, an unwanted passenger in her life. She didn't know who this person was or how to be the version of herself everyone knew now. And worse, she didn't feel like she had a choice. Not from the way Ginny and Harry had looked at her. And certainly not from how Malfoy looked at her.

She allowed herself one painful sob, tears breaking free before she pulled herself back together. She looked at the planner again, appreciating on a small level that structure brought her sanity no matter the year. She flipped forward, blank pages for days she's spent

in at St. Mungo's. She flipped more and stopped, nearly jumping out of her own skin. In red ink, at the top of three days that week, was a single word, once again written in her own hand, and underlined far too aggressively: sex.

This could not possibly get any worse.

—

The next morning Hermione exited the bedroom feeling like she hadn't slept at all. She was torn between hope and anxiety that she might dream up a memory to help bridge the gaps between her mind in 2001 and her mind in 2007. She woke more than once with a lump in her throat and a hammering in her chest. Crookshanks hovered nearby with his cat version of concern, which was to say, very little at all.

She found Malfoy in the kitchen with a cup of tea ready for her.

"How are you—oh," he started as he set the cup down in front of her, stepping as far into her personal space as he had, well, ever, as he pulled out a chair for her to sit in. "I should have shown you where your clothes are." His face fell, clearly annoyed with himself.

"I found the formalwear, but those dresses didn't seem especially conducive to quality sleep," she said, attempting a friendly tone.

He gave a small laugh and sat opposite her at the table, his own cup in front of him. "Your wardrobe has—evolved recently. You have a stash of comfortable pieces in the back of the closet."

More new information. Hermione tried to find the right place in her brain to log it, to memorize it, to become it.

"I've taken the day off work. Well, I took the whole week off, but as it's now Friday—" Malfoy began.

"You work?" Hermione couldn't help herself, the incredulity was obvious in her tone. She hadn't thought often of Malfoy since his trial. She'd testified on his behalf and then set the man out of her mind, focusing on returning to school for her NEWTs, restoring her parents' memories, and beginning a fruitful career in a world without a dark

wizard plaguing it.

But if she *had* thought of what Malfoy might be up to in his barely earned freedom, she would have assumed it was something vague and nebulous, along the lines of 'managing the estate' or 'embezzling from the trust' and other such posh aristocratic nonsense. But working? At a job that required he inform someone that he needed time off? That would have never crossed her mind.

Malfoy set his tea down, a patient, serene sort of expression on his face as he answered her. "Yes, I work."

She'd expected a quip, or a snarl, or something. She had insulted him, at least implicitly. Insult adjacency.

Instead, he'd gone rather vacant in the eyes.

"You had that same look last night," she observed, studying him.

A bit of warmth flooded him before it vanished again. It was almost like watching a kaleidoscope behind someone's eyes. But instead of colors, they were emotions, and instead of multiplying in every conceivable direction, they were whittled down, one by one. She'd never seen anything like it.

He cleared his throat, shaking his head lightly. "Sorry, I occluded a little too hard too fast."

He shrugged at her, as close to sheepish as she'd ever seen Draco Malfoy look.

"It's helping me manage this," he concluded.

Hermione found both her hands palm down on the table, staring at him with unmasked curiosity.

"You're an Occlumens?" Her question sounded closer to an accusation.

She watched another emotion flake and break away behind his eyes before he answered.

"Yes. It's quite helpful when one has a murderer as a house guest. I haven't had to use it regularly in a number of years though, so I'm a touch sloppy."

"And you need to use it because of me?"

“I do. But not all the time, at least not fully. Only when necessary.”

“If you didn’t want to bother at all, I wouldn’t mind—"

“That’s not going to happen,” Malfoy said, and if he hadn’t been occluding, Hermione was certain his tone would have been quite nasty.

“Why not?” she challenged.

Malfoy offered her a smirk, something so Malfoy-esque that it didn’t even feel real; it felt planted, faked. “Because I’d very much like for you not to hate me.”

“I don’t hate you, Malfoy.”

“Even in 2001?”

Hermione briefly wondered what would happen if he whittled down every last emotion he didn’t want until he had nothing left but his control. Would he shatter that too? Break it into smaller, more manageable pieces? Would his will become iron clad or brittle and ready to snap? She wanted to ask him. Merlin, it was interesting. But also, not the right time.

“Even in 2001,” she answered. “I didn’t even know you in 2001. And what I did know of you was from your trial, the war, and school. None of which are particularly pleasant memories. Trust you? No. But hate you? No, I’ve tried rather hard to forgive and move on.”

He was silent for a moment, watching her.

“Well, that certainly colors our first interaction after my trial differently,” he said, the hint of a real smile ghosting across his face.

“How do you mean?”

“Another time, perhaps. We’re off topic,” he said. “My point was that I’m not working today because I was planning to accompany you to visit your parents. They’ve been understandably worried, memory loss is obviously very personal to them.”

“When did you speak to my parents? Are they still upset with me? Last I remember they’d only just agreed to have dinner with me—”

“Your relationship is much better now,” Malfoy assured her. “It’s not perfect, but they came around pretty quickly. I’ve kept them updated

every day on the small torture box you send me hearts on." From his pocket, Malfoy produced a cell phone and waggled it at her.

Hermione wanted to sink into the very center of the earth at the thought that she might be sending Malfoy anything heart related via telecommunications.

"You know how to use that?" she asked.

"Not exactly. I know the three buttons I have to push to hear your voice and the other three buttons to hear your parents' voices."

Hermione snorted, the entire concept completely silly. But even as she allowed herself that little, happy thought, she felt herself stilling, sobering.

"Malfoy," she began. "I appreciate it, I do. That's—well it's far more than I expected. But I think I'd prefer to visit my family on my own."

She risked a glance up at him.

He'd stiffened against the back of his chair, shards upon shards of feeling flaking away behind his eyes until all Hermione could make out was the icy stillness of a concentrated stare.

He nodded briefly. "Of course."

He stood quickly, and Hermione noticed for the first time that he too still wore yesterday's clothes. The normally crisp lines of his dark trousers and white shirt had descended into a chaos of creases and crinkles, evidence of a poor night's sleep. He looked like he wanted to say more but thought better of it.

Instead, he disappeared into the bedroom and reemerged minutes later looking completely pulled back together.

"I have errands to run," he told her, voice still tight and cold. "Your parents are expecting you around noon, they're connected to the Floo."

He looked at her just long enough for Hermione to nod that she'd heard him before he disapparated with a *pop*.

—

Hermione found herself enveloped in a crushing hug immediately upon exiting her parents' fireplace. Which sent her tumbling into a fit of sobs.

"Oh darling, it's alright," her mother whispered against her hair as Hermione let herself fall apart for the first time since waking up at St. Mungo's. She'd given into tiny swells of tears here and there when they hit her with particular force, but never such resounding sobs of agony and relief. She'd been so successful at holding them back, from the grief of losing years of her life to the emotional unpredictability that was finding oneself married to a stranger; she'd held it all in. But to really have her parents back. That was too much.

"You were so upset with me," she managed to choke against her mother's cardigan. "Mum, I thought you'd never forgive me."

"Hush, honey, that's long past us now," her mother whispered as they knelt together on the living room floor. "Come now, we have some food ready."

Hermione allowed her mother to pull her to her feet, where she then launched herself into her father's arms, so desperate to know she really had them back. By the time she disentangled herself from her parent's arms, she'd been steered towards the dining room, where four places were set.

Hermione sniffed, wiping her face with no dignity, too wrung out to care.

"Is Draco on his way, dear?" her father asked as he walked Hermione to a seat, giving her arm tiny squeezes of encouragement.

"Oh," Hermione started, eyeing the fourth plate on the table. "I told him I'd rather visit by myself."

Her mother smiled at her, reaching out to hold her hand.

"That's quite alright," she said. "We just assumed he'd join you."

Hermione's father sat across from her.

"Please thank him again for us," he said. "He kept us very well informed, brought us to see you while you were still unconscious."

“Malfoy brought you to St. Mungo’s?” Hermione asked, trying to imagine Draco Malfoy escorting two muggles through a magical hospital.

“Of course he did,” her mother answered without missing a beat. “He’s very considerate.”

Hermione couldn’t reconcile those words with her image of Malfoy so she said nothing. She helped herself to some food, pushing it around her plate more than eating as she tried to think of a single thing she could say to her parents that didn’t cause a lump to form in her throat.

Finally, after an agonizing few minutes of silence, she settled on, “have you heard how much time I lost?”

Her father offered her a smile, “Draco told us. You’re going to be fine dear, we know better than most. It just takes time.”

Hermione’s heart wrenched. His tone was kind but his words still sliced through her, a direct assault through skin and bone, directly to her heart. Guilt flared inside her.

“They don’t know that,” Hermione said in a small voice. “The healers hope I’ll get my memories back, but they don’t know with certainty.” She cracked, choking on another sob. She balled her hands into fists, pressing them to the top of the table, trying to anchor herself to something solid. “I can’t help but feel like I deserve it.” The admission tore through her.

Her mother was immediately beside her, a soothing hand rubbing circles into her back, whispering words of assurance.

“This is *not* some kind of recompense for what you had to do to us,” her father said in a level voice from across the table.

“It stands to reason—" Hermione began, but her father cut her off.

“It most certainly does not. The universe doesn’t operate on a debt system. There’s no version of this world where you deserve to lose what you’ve lost.”

Hermione didn’t have the wherewithal to do anything but cry, meal forgotten, into the arms of her mother who, somehow, had forgiven her.

—

Day had turned to night by the time Hermione left her parents' house. She cried more than once while she was there, occasionally slipping into a well of grief that she could only dare visit in her childhood home, comforted by her family. But they laughed too, toeing carefully around the last six years so as to not overwhelm, and instead slipping easily into discussions of a happy childhood, dental practice anecdotes, and the weather when conversation grew thin.

After a full day of reconnecting with her parents, coupled with the emotional toll her tears took, Hermione felt dead on her feet by the time she stepped through the fireplace and into the flat she was meant to share with Malfoy.

She stopped, frozen in place at the sight before her.

Draco Malfoy lay sprawled, unconscious, across the obnoxious green sofa. Asleep, he looked much more like the boy she'd known in her youth, worry lines vanished, the tightness around his eyes and jaw released. His hair fell messily over his forehead, no longer beholden to whatever product or charm he used to keep it in place during the day. He slept with his mouth partially open. Which was *almost* endearing.

But the thing that gave Hermione pause, that stopped her in her tracks and pulled at her heart with a familiar feeling of longing she'd never before felt directed towards the man in front of her, was the sight of Crookshanks, curled in a ball and fast asleep on his chest.

Chapter End Notes

art inspired by this chapter:
Draco with Crookshanks by Avendell
Flat Interior by Nayshv

Chapter 2: Ronald Weasley

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“There are two ways of seeing: with the body and with the soul. The body's sight can sometimes forget, but the soul remembers forever.”

— Alexandre Dumas, The Count of Monte Cristo

—

February

“Maybe if we just *tried* using a pensieve,” Hermione began, broaching the topic for the third time that week over breakfast.

Life with Malfoy had settled into a strange sort of detente wherein Hermione acknowledged that he wasn’t the childhood bully turned reluctant death eater she remembered him as and he continued tiptoeing around her as if expecting her to run away at any moment. He went to work; she stayed in the flat and researched. Sometimes she met Harry or Ginny for lunch. But mostly, she read. She read hundreds of Daily Prophets. She read every medical journal, muggle and magical, she could find relating to memory loss. And she read, reluctantly, a painfully embarrassing text message history wherein she’d sent all sorts of confessions of love and adoration to a wizard who clearly had no idea how to text her back. It was doting, sweet in a strange way, and yet, just reading them made her skin crawl in mortification.

“Absolutely not,” Malfoy said with much less vitriol than the last time she’d brought up the topic of pensieves.

She tried again, aiming for a calm and collected tone: reasonable. “The healers themselves have admitted my case has no exact precedent—"

“And yet they were adamant that viewing memories of yourself from someone else’s perspective could further distance you from your own —"

“But if I’m not going to get them back at all—"

His clenched fist descended to the table. The momentum of his frustrated slam slowed into something careful and controlled, landing lightly against the wood. Hermione’s focus darted to his eyes as he cooled, calling upon his Occlumency.

“Don’t say that,” he bit out.

“Say what? That I might not get my memories back? At this point, I might not, Malfoy.”

A pained grimace pulled at his mouth before he schooled his features back to neutral.

“It’s only been a month,” he said, composed.

Hermione huffed a breath, blowing away the stray curls that had fallen forward as she debated. “A month is a long time."

“Nowhere near six years.”

Hermione frowned.

“You’re more stubborn than this,” Malfoy said when she had no response.

“Excuse me?”

He leaned back against his chair, arms crossed in front of him. He tilted his head and lifted a brow: a torrent of classic Malfoy posturing. To Hermione’s surprise, some of his defenses seemed to slide away.

“You’re too stubborn, and I mean that in the best sense of the word, to resign yourself to failure after a single month.”

Hermione opened her mouth to respond but closed it again before the words came out. Indignation and frustration warred their way to the tip of her tongue. But she was too distracted by the crinkle of lines at the corners of Malfoy’s eyes: a smile nowhere near his lips. It stalled her brain and mouth.

“Look,” Malfoy started again, clearly taking her silence as permission to carry on. “You’ve just started working again—"

“Hardly. They have me reviewing paperwork.”

“Regardless,” Malfoy cut back in. “We’ve been very conservative with how much we introduce you to, we’ve been taking it slow. We’ll start introducing more.”

“I’m not good at being patient, Malfoy.”

“Insatiable for knowledge, I’m well aware.”

A flare of green from the fireplace halted Hermione’s instinct to slap the smug look off Malfoy’s face. Harry’s voice floated from the living room towards their standoff at the kitchen table.

“Malfoys? Can I come through? I just need a minute.”

Hermione jumped to her feet, opting to ignore being referenced as a Malfoy.

“Come on over,” she said, crossing to the living room. In the next moment, Harry Potter stood in front of her. The relief she felt every time she’d set eyes on him since her accident rushed through her again. She clung to his familiarity as she hugged him.

Malfoy hadn’t bothered to move from his seat at the table, he just turned slightly to acknowledge his guest.

“I have news,” Harry rushed to say.

“Oh?”

“Promotion. I got a promotion. They gave me the department.”

Hermione launched herself at Harry again, mumbling effusive congratulations against his shoulder.

Malfoy appeared behind her as she broke away, offering Harry a hand.

“Not bad, Potter. You buying us drinks, then?”

Every time Malfoy said something to Harry that wasn’t at least partially vile, Hermione felt like she’d stepped into a separate reality. This time was no different. His words came with no sneer, no implication of nepotism, nothing but what looked like genuine, if guarded, congratulations.

“Sure am,” Harry said, a lopsided, proud grin lighting up his entire face. “I realize it’s a Wednesday but we’re going out, you’ll come, yeah?”

Malfoy locked eyes with Hermione for a moment, their conversation about introducing more running through her head. She couldn't be a timid, research-obsessed shut-in forever, only venturing out of the flat to go to work, visit her parents, or grab the occasional lunch with Harry and Ginny.

"Yes," Hermione insisted. She already felt breathless at the thrill of doing something different, something with the friends she needed to see more of, since apparently having kids took up a lot of time.

"We're going to do a nice dinner, make a whole thing of it," Harry said. "Just Floo to ours at seven."

And with a few more nods and hugs of congratulations, nods from Malfoy, hugs from Hermione, Harry disappeared back through the Floo.

—

Wearing something formal felt nice.

Hermione had spent the couple of weeks since her accident rotating between the three pairs of denim and handful of jumpers that had been stashed in a corner of the closet behind Malfoy's honestly obscene tie and pocket square collection. It was almost empowering to put on a dress and do her hair like her life required more from her than jeans and a jumper or a Ministry compliant skirt and blouse.

She evaluated herself in the bathroom mirror. She'd managed to bundle her mass of hair into a low bun and the nape of her neck, loose curls already breaking free and framing her face. Her dress, navy and simple, clung to the soft curves she was still getting used to having. In her six lost years, the thin, barely post-teenage frame she'd had filled out into a body that actually looked like it belonged to the woman whose face stared back at her in the mirror. She honestly liked the way she looked in the dress, which was a difficult feeling to reconcile when she didn't entirely recognize the reflection staring back at her.

A knock sounded on the bathroom door.

The dance she and Malfoy had been doing in order to give each other adequate personal space to get ready every day, but especially for this

particular evening out, required a lot of knocking on doors and waiting for permission to enter rooms.

“I was just wondering what color dress you’re wearing,” Malfoy’s voice cut through the door. Hermione gave her reflection one last glance, a smile for confidence, and opened the door to face him.

Malfoy had been standing right up against the bathroom door, so when Hermione opened it, she found herself face to face with him, with less than an arm’s length between them. But the distance felt much smaller than that. Because, while fully clothed, Malfoy’s shirt was only halfway done up, as if his question about her dress color had taken precedence over continuing to clothe himself. It required more willpower than she would have liked to look at his face and not his chest.

Not that he would have noticed if she snuck a peek. His focus was most certainly not on her face. Hermione could practically feel the path his eyes trailed over her dress, over her *body* inside the dress, until his gaze finally met hers. He cleared his throat as Hermione tried not to cringe at being so overtly examined by Draco Malfoy.

“You went with the navy one—that’s ok, I’ll change.” He turned to head back to the bedroom.

Hermione flushed with an unfamiliar sense of self-consciousness. Just moments ago, she’d felt so good about her choice, about how she looked, but one examination and cryptic comment from Malfoy sent her confidence plummeting. It was like being thirteen again, huge hair and front teeth taking up all the real estate on her head and leaving little room for anything else.

“Should I not have?” she asked, calling after him and hating that a small part of her wanted his approval.

“Sorry?”

“Worn the navy one. Should I not have worn it?” she asked. She’d stepped into the hallway and gestured to the dress. “I thought it looked nice—"

She paused when Malfoy took a step towards her. He caught himself, as if only just realizing that he’d even moved at all, and then he stood painfully still. Hermione expected to see coldness take control of his features, snuffing out the uncertainty and unease painted across his face as he watched her. The coldness didn’t come. Instead, a small

smile formed.

“You look—it’s lovely. The dress. It’s—my favorite on you.” The words were stunted, difficult for him to get out. Hermione couldn’t get used to a version of Draco Malfoy who took care with his words, who considered before he spoke. “But I’m wearing black,” he continued, words much smoother when referencing himself. “I’ll just change to gray and we can leave.”

And with a bit of a hasty retreat back into the bedroom, closing the door behind him, Hermione was left in the hallway to wonder about the history of the fabric currently resting against her skin. Like almost everything else inside the flat, it had some kind of meaning, a history, to Malfoy that she didn’t know. It was like walking a minefield in her own home, half expecting everything she touched to blow up, never knowing what was secretly more than met the eye.

—

“Ron’s coming,” Ginny said by way of greeting as Hermione stepped through the Floo and into Grimmauld Place. “I just wanted to make sure you knew because I would bet quite a few Galleons that Harry forgot to—yes, by the look on your face he definitely didn’t mention it.”

Malfoy stumbled into Hermione from behind as he came through the Floo after her. Hermione hadn’t moved from the spot she’d landed in as soon as Ginny said ‘Ron.’ Hermione had done a damn fine job managing her thoughts away from Ronald Weasley over the last month. Especially after Ginny had gently informed her over lunch he was now married and expecting a child with his wife.

But the short notice on seeing him again? After six years in the real world but barely any time in her mind? Her chest tightened.

Malfoy made a confused noise behind her, shuffling by and making small apologies for jostling her in his landing. He straightened, standing beside her, spotting Ginny.

“Weaselette,” he said. “Are those wrinkles I see?”

Ginny snorted. Hermione was horrified.

“Ferret,” she shot back. “Is your hairline receding?”

“Unlikely, the last I saw him my father still had all his hair.”

“Pity,” Ginny mused. “There’s still time. I won’t give up hope.”

Hermione’s focus shifted from Ginny to Malfoy and back again, trying to decipher if either of them was offended. Or upset. Or if, gods forbid, they might be joking.

But before Hermione could open her mouth to demand an explanation for whatever it was she’d just witnessed, Harry strolled in, straightening a bow tie and looking less like a man in charge of an entire department at the Ministry of Magic and more like a big kid playing dress-up. And Hermione loved him for it.

“See that, Gin? Took twenty six years but I’ve finally tied a bow tie by myself.”

Ginny just rolled her eyes and kissed her husband lightly on the cheek. Hermione suddenly felt like the space between where she stood and where Malfoy stood grew to the size of a small canyon, a painful contrast to the intimacy in front of them.

Harry simply smiled at his wife’s touch and looped her arm around his.

“Let’s get going then,” he said. “We’ve decided just to Floo to Diagon Alley, Ron and Lavender are meeting us there.”

And with no consideration at all for the bomb he’d just dropped on Hermione’s psyche, Harry stepped into the Floo with Ginny on his arm. Ginny caught Hermione’s gaze before they spun away in a blur of green flames, concern etched across her face.

Lavender. Lavender Brown. Hermione knew a thing or two about deductive reasoning. If Ron was married with a pregnant wife, and if Ron was meeting them at dinner with said wife, and if the person Ron was attending dinner with was indeed Lavender Brown, then logically, Ron was married to Lavender Brown. Was she underwater? Where did all the air go?

Hermione felt the room spin, trying to make sense of whatever new reality she’d sunk into. Malfoy hadn’t moved a muscle from where he stood nearby. She took a step back, finding a chair and sitting, adrift in the sea of her efforts to sort this new piece of information into the

catalogue of her strange new life.

A tight, quiet voice dragged her back to shore. “Are you okay?”

Hermione’s focus snapped to the man in front of her. He had his hands jammed in his pockets, a deep vertical crease of concentration ran between his brows, and a tense muscle strained along the side of his neck, running towards his jaw. But his eyes were calm, as if every ounce of his concentration was focused on remaining so.

“Yes,” Hermione said. “I’m fine—let’s just go.”

“Would you rather not?” he asked. “We could cancel, they’d understand.”

“Would you rather cancel?” she countered, trying to buy herself more time.

“Yes.”

Hermione blinked.

“That was—honest.”

“I can’t imagine I’m going to enjoy watching my wife sort through her suddenly unresolved feelings for her ex-boyfriend.” Malfoy rubbed the back of his neck, a rare indication of his discomfort. “But if you want to go out—you did put on that beautiful dress, after all. These are your friends. It’s not about me.”

Hermione bristled. She didn’t appreciate the implication that she was going to gawk and fawn over Ron at a dinner with friends, at a dinner where Ron’s wife was present.

Hermione caught herself, chasing down the errant thought that tore through her brain. Did that mean she’d gawk and fawn if Lavender wasn’t present? Her face grew hot with a flush of embarrassment. No, it was just a poor choice of words. But it still tasted shameful.

She was perfectly capable of having dinner with Ronald Weasley and his wife without making an idiot of herself.

“I’d still like to go,” she concluded, hoping Malfoy couldn’t see the blush in her cheeks.

He nodded briefly and handed her the pot of Floo powder, making no attempt to travel in tandem as Ginny and Harry had just done.

“Something to keep in mind,” he said as she stepped into the flames. “You’re the one who left him.”

Hermione threw the powder at her feet and spun away, a flash of blonde and grey burned behind her eyes.

“I’m sorry, Hermione,” Harry said the moment she stepped into Diagon Alley. “Ginny has informed me I’m oblivious. I didn’t mean to spring Ron and Lavender on you.”

This time, Hermione remembered to step aside so that Malfoy would have space to exit the Floo.

“Ginny went ahead and met with them at the restaurant,” Harry continued. A flash of light indicated Malfoy’s arrival. “You ready?” Harry asked.

Hermione just nodded, wrangling her Gryffindor bravery to assist her.

“This way, then,” Harry said, taking the lead.

From her periphery, Hermione could see Malfoy flex the fingers in his left hand beside her.

He let out a small breath. “Could I offer you my arm?” he asked just as she’d taken her first step to follow Harry.

Hermione pivoted to find Draco Malfoy still standing near the Floo, an arm offered to walk with her. Out of context, he looked ridiculous: dressed in his tailored trousers, shirt, and overcoat, an arm lifted and bent at the elbow, a cautious, guarded look crystalizing on his features. He saw her answer before she even knew it.

Hermione’s breath had caught in her throat. An unpleasant heat spread through her chest. She understood, belatedly, Harry’s sentiments about not knowing whether to laugh or cry when he escorted her home from St. Mungo’s.

Malfoy dropped his arm.

“Apologies,” he said in a clipped tone. “I shouldn’t have—"

“No, I’m sorry—just, I’m not—not yet,” she finished, a fine example of the English language.

In the span of those few mortifying seconds, Harry had left them behind. From his place several storefronts away he’d turned and was

watching them.

“You coming?” he half-shouted down the street.

“Yes, Potter, we’re coming,” Malfoy answered under his breath.

—

Ginny, Ron, and Lavender were all sitting at the table by the time Hermione arrived with Harry and Malfoy. Ron stood when he saw her, an awkward kind of chivalry. He took a step forward, eyes locked with hers, and offered her a short but firm hug with a simple ‘hey’ as her greeting.

And it was everything like Hermione remembered. And nothing like it at the same time. Moreover, it was far too brief an encounter to gather the necessary data for a full comparison. She felt a little dizzy again, almost wishing she’d taken Malfoy up on his offer to return to the flat. Because looking into Ronald Weasley’s face, all blue eyes and freckles, looking like he hadn’t aged a day, should have felt like home. And yet, it didn’t.

Lavender stepped forward next, the bump of her belly pressing into Hermione’s ribs as they hugged in what felt more like an obligation than a true greeting.

“Hermione, hi. I’m Lavender. We went to school together,” Lavender said, her wide eyes boring into Hermione’s skull as if trying to communicate meaning by sheer force of will.

“I—yes Lavender, I know who you—"

“Is there wine?” Malfoy interjected, searching the table. Ginny already had a glass poured for him, holding it out towards him from her seat.

“Bless, Weasel,” he said. “I may consider rescinding any disparaging comments I’ve made about you today depending on the vintage you’ve selected.”

Hermione stepped away from Lavender, uncomfortable under the woman’s bright, concerned gaze. As she pulled out a chair, Malfoy corrected her, pulling out the one in front of him instead, motioning

for her to take it.

“I can’t pick my own seat?” Hermione asked, feeling the edge in her tone.

Even though he didn’t actually roll his eyes, Hermione could feel the intent to do so in his tone. “I’m left handed,” Malfoy said. “You don’t want to sit on my left.”

Ginny giggled into her wine. “Much like his face, Malfoy’s elbows are quite pointy.”

“This is great,” Harry said, staring at the breadbasket on the table. “This is going to be great.” Hermione couldn’t quite tell who he was trying to convince.

With the seating arrangements situated, Hermione found herself sitting across from Ginny, with Harry at the head of the table to her right. Malfoy sat to her left, across from Ron and next to Lavender. He looked supremely dissatisfied with his lot. His wine glass was already close to empty.

A quiet seemed to ripple across the table as everyone settled. Their attempt at whatever their old normal used to look like clearly had withered and died before their eyes.

“So, tell us about this promotion, Potter,” Malfoy prompted to the silent table, refilling his wine and offering the basket of bread to Lavender.

Color Hermione shocked, the man had social skills.

Harry launched into an excited retelling of most of his Auror career, using just about every case he’d ever had as justification as to why he deserved a promotion to Head Auror. Around the time Harry got to his ‘big case of 2004,’ Hermione got the sense that Harry was partly reliving his interviewing process, partly embellishing for Hermione’s benefit, and partly participating in some strange wand measuring contest with Malfoy.

Malfoy, for his part, listened patiently, drank more wine, and kept asking probing questions like ‘how did you draw that conclusion?’ and ‘what made you suspect the goblin?’ and worse yet, ‘don’t you think that was a bit of a hasty decision?’ Hermione felt herself glazing over, lost between two men engaged in a never-ending conversation that it seemed like neither of them actually wanted to be having, yet kept

continuing regardless. Entrees arrived and meals were eaten, and yet the endless back and forth between Harry and Malfoy droned on.

Hermione's focus drifted to the other side of the table where Ron and Lavender had entered into their own conversation. Hermione watched them interact, studying her own reactions, waiting for a surge of jealousy or painful longing. But instead, she found herself mostly perplexed. Ron looked almost the same as he had since the day he turned seventeen: tall and freckled and ginger and *good.* These were things that at one time had sent her pulse racing. And she remembered those things doing so quite recently.

But something about seeing him so content with Lavender, as vapid as Hermione found her, seemed to scrub the affinity for him from her veins, leaving only a clinical sort of attachment based on their shared history. It was a strange feeling, and sudden, and a far cry from what she'd expected. She'd been so desperate to see him when she first woke up at the hospital, convinced that if she could just see Ron everything would make sense again and whatever time they said she'd lost would dissipate into the ether.

She wanted to love him. Somewhere, fighting with the logical part of her brain, a piece of Hermione wanted to love him because he was her first, and because she thought he would be her last. She smiled, finally feeling a fondness like she'd been expecting, but it was a fondness like how she felt towards Harry, separate from feelings of want and desire. Ron turned to look at her, blue eyes meeting brown, and Hermione realized the table had gone quiet.

She'd been staring.

Gods, how long had she been staring? Her stomach dropped, she could feel the unease spreading like a cold stain across the tablecloth, seeping into their seats, soaking them to the bone. Hermione looked down, wishing to be *stupefied* as she considered how long her friends might have just watched her stare at her ex-boyfriend while he chatted with his pregnant wife.

Beside her, Hermione could see Malfoy's fist clenched by his leg, knuckles white from the force of it. She couldn't bring herself to look at him. Hermione accepted that bit of cowardice from herself and instead glanced at Ginny, who had a brow lifted, wine glass in hand, and a disapproving tension in her eyes. Hermione switched to Harry, who couldn't quite make eye contact with her and looked about ready to crawl under the table.

Finally, Hermione turned her attention to Malfoy. He looked like he was focusing on something in the middle distance behind Ginny's head, barely moving. The only indication that he was even breathing came from the slight flare of his nostrils as he inhaled.

The table rattled as he stood abruptly, silverware and plates clattering. His head jerked down to look at Hermione before immediately jerking back up again as if instantly regretting the decision.

"If you'll excuse me," he said, apparating right then and there. His ivory serviette fluttered to the floor as a hostess rushed over and admonished that apparation wasn't permitted inside the restaurant.

"Well, that seemed sudden," Lavender whispered, loud enough for the entire table to hear.

"I'll find our waiter for the check," Ron announced as he stood and left as well. Lavender watched him go and seemed entirely unaffected by the mood at the table.

Harry let out a low groan just before Ginny smacked him on the arm.

"Harry James Potter, did you have to get into a pissing contest with the ferret over dinner? Some of us were trying to eat."

Harry raised his hands in defense. "What? There was no pissing, I was just talking and he was goading me—"

"Oh, he was not," Ginny snapped. "He was clearly trying to keep the conversation going so Hermione didn't feel uncomfortable."

Ginny turned her fire on Hermione.

"And you," she started. "Are you going to follow him or not?"

"I'm sure Ron can find our waiter on his own—"

"Oh, for Merlin's sake, not Ron, Malfoy."

Oh. Of course.

"I doubt he wants to see me right now," Hermione said, embarrassment creeping up her neck.

"Probably not," Ginny agreed. "But you're likely the only person who he'll actually let see him. And you should probably apologize for ogling my brother at dinner. Shit, you should apologize to Lavender,

too.”

“Gin, you’re being a bit harsh,” Harry said.

“Who was ogling Ron?” Lavender asked, hand resting atop her baby bump. “You don’t mean Hermione, do you? That was her deep thinking face. Very different from her ogling face. I’ve seen both.”

Of all the people to come to Hermione’s defense, Ron’s own wife wouldn’t have been on Hermione’s shortlist.

“Sure looked like an ogle to me,” Ginny said, downing the last of her wine.

“No, her mouth was closed,” Lavender stated simply, letting out a soft giggle. ”Mouth closed, thinking. Mouth open, ogling. She used them both quite a lot with Krum. Do you remember Viktor Krum, Hermione?” Lavender asked, switching her attention away from Ginny. “I have to admit, I was so terribly jealous—"

“I should find Malfoy,” Hermione interrupted.

“I’m sorry ‘Mione,” Harry said, picking at the leftover piece of a baguette sitting on his plate. “I just wanted us to have a nice time, like it used to be.”

She offered him a tight smile, holding in the cruel thing she wanted to say in that moment, knowing it would hurt her just as much as it would hurt him.

Things were never going to be how they used to.

Disregarding the direction of the hostess, Hermione apparated back to the flat.

—

Malfoy stood in the kitchen with a tumbler in his hand. He knocked back the remainder of his drink when Hermione appeared next to the table with a faint *pop*.

The only light in the room came from the moon casting its glow from the window behind Malfoy, illuminating his already nearly white hair

and shadowing his features in darkness. She found herself straining against the dark to see his expression, desperate to know just how much damage she'd done.

"Careful," he said in an almost inaudible voice. He pulled out his wand and muttered a spell. Glittering fragments of glass lifted from the floor, soft moonlight bounced off their raw edges as they twisted in the air, coming together again, whole.

It was a pretty bit of magic.

"Malfoy, I—"

"Don't," he snapped, his voice so similar to what she'd been expecting all along. It was the same kind of curtness, the same kind of venom-laced articulation that she'd heard in classrooms, corridors, and the dining hall for years. It surprised her how much its reemergence caught her off guard. She'd apparently grown accustomed to a civil Malfoy without even realizing it.

His voice had already softened by the time he spoke again.

"I've had too much to drink—I can't occlude. I can't talk to you right now."

Hermione bit at the inside of her bottom lip, feeling the coppery tang of blood as her teeth cut through flesh. It wasn't what he thought. She hadn't been ogling. This was absolutely a conversation they could have. She hadn't meant to hurt him, and the thought struck her, sudden and tasting like the blood in her mouth, that it mattered to her that she had.

"I'd prefer if you didn't occlude, honestly," she said. "It doesn't feel like talking to a real person."

He barked a cruel laugh. "Some things never fucking change, then, do they?" He set his tumbler down on the counter. His head angled up and, despite being shrouded in shadows, Hermione was certain he was staring directly at her. "We've already had that fight. And I don't want to have this one, please," his sincerity was tinged with a sneer, as if he couldn't quite help himself. "I don't want to upset you."

"This isn't a fight," Hermione insisted. "Just an apology. I know what it looked like I was doing at dinner, but I wasn't."

Hermione listened to the sound of Malfoy inhaling deeply before he

released a breath that occupied every last iota of space in the kitchen. No other noise existed in the world at that moment, just the sound of air being pushed and pulled through clenched teeth.

“I told you,” he said. Whatever control he had over his tone had begun to waver with the bleeding edge of his anger. “I told you exactly what I didn’t want to witness and I had to do it anyway.”

I can’t imagine I’m going to enjoy watching my wife sort through her suddenly unresolved feelings for her ex-boyfriend.

“I tried, I did. But that was fucking humiliating. So while I appreciate the apology, I do not accept at this time.”

Hermione stuttered, confused, “What—when—?”

“An apology isn’t always enough,” he said, anger balancing carefully on the edge of his control. He reached for the bottle of liquor and tipped a generous pour into his glass. “I learned that one from the immaculate Hermione Granger.”

“Well I’m not her,” Hermione snapped, finally at her wit’s end with the darkness. She whipped out her wand and sent light careening into every corner of the small kitchen. Malfoy jolted, tumbler in one hand, the other covering his eyes for defense. Hermione took a purposeful step forward and grabbed the recently repaired glass from where it sat opposite Malfoy. She leaned across the island counter and snatched the bottle of what she could now identify as firewhisky and poured herself a splash, downing it without thinking twice.

“Furthermore,” she continued as if the thought hadn’t been interrupted by anything at all. “I can’t be her, that version of me that you knew. I’m not her. Not without the memories.” Hermione cringed her blunt words and the burn of whisky in the back of her throat.

Malfoy took in another deep breath through his nose. He held his glass loosely, long fingers just barely curling around the engraved glass. It canted at an angle in his grip. He let the bottom of it tap against the counter, once, twice, three times before he spoke, avoiding her eyes.

“You’re not two different people,” he told her. “You’re still you, just with less context.”

Hermione felt rooted to her spot, oddly touched by the sage quality of his observation, even if she disagreed. Malfoy let his glass fully rest on the countertop before he took a step back, leaning against the sink. He

ran his thumb and forefinger over his brows before dragging his hand through his hair, rife with frustrated body language. Hermione realized her mouth had slipped open, deep in thought as she watched.

“It wasn’t the same,” Hermione said. “With Ron—that’s what I was thinking about. It was confusing that it wasn’t the same.”

Malfoy let out another breath. Hermione wondered if, lacking his Occlumency, control over his breathing was the only thing holding all his shards together.

“I’m going to go,” he said.

“What?”

“I need to—not be here.” His voice was strained. “I don’t want to lash out more than I already have.”

He grabbed the neck of the whisky bottle and finally looked at her.

“I’ll see you in the morning,” he said. The next moment, he was gone.

—

“Harry’s just putting the boys down,” Ginny said as Hermione stepped into Grimmauld Place for the second time in a matter of hours. This time, distinctly alone. “I’m going to guess based on the fact that you’re here and not there that it didn’t go well.”

Hermione wasn’t totally sure how it went if she was being honest with herself. She shuffled forward and collapsed onto the large leather sofa in the center of the room. Ginny curled up next to her, tucking her feet beneath her and leaning against her arm perched on the back of the furniture.

“You found him at least, right?” she asked.

“I did, and he was upset. But Gin, I promise I wasn’t trying to look at Ron like that. It was just so strange because I expected to feel like I always have when I saw him and I just—I didn’t. And I was trying to figure it out.”

Harry entered the living room, paused mid-step when he saw

Hermione, and then continued to a seat across from the sofa, offering her a weak smile of solidarity as he sat.

“Did you tell pointy that?” Ginny asked.

Hermione nodded. “He needed space. And I’m exhausted.”

“He kicked you out?” Harry asked, voice lifting as he leaned forward, anger in his eyes.

“No, no. He left, but he said he’d be back in the morning.”

Harry seemed to consider her words for a moment, searching for a lie, before he leaned back in his chair again and propped his feet up on the coffee table.

A question pushed itself to the forefront of Hermione’s mind.

“Harry, do you have a pensieve here?” she asked. He opened his mouth to answer but Ginny beat him to it.

“Oh, don’t you dare,” she admonished. “I have a copy of your treatment plan, remember?”

“Plus Malfoy told me last week I was, and I quote, ‘under no uncertain terms to allow Hermione anywhere near a fucking pensieve, are we clear Potter?’ We were, in fact, clear.” Harry looked far too pleased with his impersonation of Malfoy.

“You’re slipping, sweetheart. His vowels are much more crisp than that. You didn’t sound haughty enough.” Ginny chuckled quietly beside Hermione.

Hermione just crossed her arms, feeling defensive. “It’s not like I can do anything with a pensieve if no one will give me their memories to watch anyway.”

“And we won’t,” Ginny said. “Not willing to risk that brilliant brain of yours.”

“We could tell you, though,” Harry offered.

“Tell me what?” Hermione asked, releasing her arms and fidgeting with her hands.

“Just a bit about the two of you, if you want,” Harry said. “How much has Malfoy told you?”

“He hasn’t—we don’t—we haven’t really talked much.”

The look Ginny gave her was somewhere between confusion and sympathy.

“I just haven’t really figured out how to talk to him, yet,” Hermione said. “Every time we’re having a halfway normal conversation I remember I’m married to him and then my brain just kind of shuts down. And I don’t see him that much, either. Just at breakfast really. And then he goes to work and I do research or go to my job and he comes back pretty late most days so we just don’t talk much.”

“Well, from what I understand,” Ginny started. “You rather enjoy talking to him.”

“Not me,” Hermione said. “Her. The Hermione who had all the memories.”

“You’re the same person, ‘Mione,” Harry said with that reassuring smile of his that could convince her to do anything for him. And he’d repeated the exact same sentiment as Malfoy. But Hermione had to admit that it meant more coming from Harry, from someone whose motives she trusted implicitly.

Ginny rose suddenly. “I was going to be done for the night but I think we need more wine.”

“And why is that?” Hermione asked, already feeling the effects of her wine at dinner and the shot she’d taken on impulse in the kitchen with Malfoy.

“Because I’m pretty sure I’m about to try and convince you that the ferret isn’t half bad, which is a cold day in hell type of scenario, so wine will be required. Harry?”

“Merlin, yes. What has happened to us?” Harry asked.

Ginny gestured to Hermione as she began pouring from the bottle she’d summoned. “This one decided to introduce a rodent to our inner circle and now we’ve become inexplicably and inadvisably attached.”

“Ferrets are mustelids, not rodents,” Hermione replied automatically.

“Same thing,” Harry said.

“Not exactly, they’re actually in the same family as weasels, funnily

enough."

Ginny paused, a glass of wine half outstretched towards her husband. "Was that a clever way of suggesting that all pureblood families are related, that I'm related to *him?"*

Hermione couldn't help but giggle. "Not intentionally, but it is a rather nice comparison. Especially since you are related, technically and distantly, right?"

Ginny finished her wine delivery and returned to her place next to Hermione, offering her a glass as well. "I'm going to choose to ignore that since you're clearly distraught and not thinking properly."

Hermione settled further into the sofa, crossing her legs beneath her.

"Well," she said with a resigned breath. "Let's hear it. Convince me."

"Where to start?" Ginny asked, glancing at Harry.

"The beginning, I guess?" he shrugged.

Hermione felt unexpected nerves fluttering inside her. Suddenly, she was quite grateful for the glass of wine in her hands.

"After you and Ron broke up," Ginny said. "Things were…"

"Weird, they were weird," Harry finished.

"You worked a lot," Ginny continued. "At the beginning of 2002 you started on a new project at the Ministry. Said you needed a break from the magical creatures division so you joined a special project working on dark artifact decommissioning."

Hermione took a sip of her wine, trying to find the traces of recollection somewhere inside her head. But there was nothing, cavernous and blank: it was like learning history from Professor Binns, merely listening to facts she could memorize and log.

Harry laughed unexpectedly. "Gods, you should have seen your face when you came bursting through our Floo shouting about being assigned to Malfoy Manor."

"I'm glad you can find humor in it, Harry," Hermione deadpanned. "Why would the Ministry assign me an estate I have such—history with?" She gripped her glass, refusing to give into the impulse to rub at the slur no longer carved into her left arm.

“Because you’re the best,” Ginny said simply. “And the Malfoy Estate was the biggest problem at the time. Between the manor and their vaults at Gringotts, it kept you busy for three years.”

Hermione could feel her eyes widening, “it took me three years to sort through it all?”

“No, someone else works it now. They took the project from you when the two of you got engaged. Conflicts of interest and all that,” Harry said with a wave of his hand that said he’d already had to deal with more than enough Ministry politics for his liking.

“If I’m understanding correctly,” Hermione said. “I somehow ended up liking Malfoy as a result of sorting through all the dark and terrible antiques his family kept laying around?”

“Essentially,” Ginny said.

“That explains nothing.”

“It explains proximity,” Ginny insisted. “Which was the bare minimum that was needed for all that chemistry you two have to take control.”

Harry made a mildly disgusted noise into his wine from across the room.

Hermione’s protestations that she most certainly did not have chemistry with Malfoy were cut off by a wail from elsewhere in the house.

Ginny and Harry both rolled their eyes.

“Right on schedule,” Ginny mumbled.

Hermione looked at her, confused.

“James is a finicky sleeper, we usually have a couple of rounds of this before he finally settles. Thank Merlin, Albus sleeps like the dead,” Ginny told her, rising.

Everything about Malfoy suddenly dropped from her focus. Hermione stood too, feeling overwhelmed by the thought of the children in this house who she still didn’t know.

“Could I,” she started, feeling silly and uncomfortable at the same time. “Could I see him?”

Harry practically ran out of the room, a grin plastered on his face. “I’ll get him!”

Ginny laughed softly. “He’s been dying for you to ask.” She tucked a strand of red hair behind her ear and regarded Hermione with a thoughtful expression. “I know we haven’t told you, but has Malfoy mentioned anything to you at all, about James?”

“What about him?” Hermione asked. A pulse of anxiety shot through her, worried in a way she couldn’t quite describe for a child she did not know.

Ginny smiled, reaching out to touch Hermione’s arm.

“You’re his godmother,” she said.

“I’m his—" she didn’t finish speaking because Harry had reentered the room, a toddler version of himself clinging to his neck. Hermione’s vision swam in a flood of quiet tears, her body reacting before her brain could even process what she was seeing. Harry whispered something into the crook of the child’s neck and James turned his tiny head towards Hermione.

James’s face lit up when he saw her and Hermione felt the floor drop out from beneath her, the weight of a child’s precious smile absolutely crushing her.

Harry walked closer. James unwrapped his arms from his father’s neck and instead opened them towards Hermione, repeating something that sounded suspiciously like ‘my-knee’ over and over again.

“Are you alright to hold him?” Ginny asked in a whisper.

“Yes,” Hermione breathed without a blink of consideration.

Hermione forgot to breathe as the groggy toddler wrapped his arms around her neck. On instinct she began hushing him, bouncing lightly on her feet, twisting slightly back and forth at her hips, offering movement and murmurs to ease the already sleepy child back to his slumber.

Harry and Ginny had identical looks of amazement on their faces.

And Hermione could feel it too, the amazement, deep in her bones. The familiarity she felt with this child, whom she’d never met, at least not in her present mind, yet who somehow felt so close to her heart,

consumed her. She knew him even though she didn't. She understood then, holding James in her arms; she wasn't really two different Hermione's. She was just missing the right context.

Chapter End Notes

i love and appreciate kudos and comments if you feel so inclined to let me know what you think!! also, come hang out with me on tumblr, its a good time!

Chapter 3: Theodore Nott

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Learning does not make one learned: there are those who have knowledge and those who have understanding. The first requires memory and the second philosophy."

— Alexandre Dumas, The Count of Monte Cristo

—

March

Hermione had a mission. Just when she felt like she might finally be able to talk to Malfoy without descending into a mental spiral intent on reminding her about all the things she didn't know about her own life, Malfoy decided that he had to be even *more* careful around her. And truth be told, all the space and the worry and the Occlumency were starting to get under her skin. Every cautious glance and guarded question prickled at her nerve endings, irritating and grating.

So, on a Saturday morning three weeks after what Ginny had started referring to as the 'disaster dinner,' Hermione opted for directness. She'd never been especially deft at subtlety, and that fact was never more apparent than when trying to quietly convince a Slytherin that she could handle more, that he could be less careful, that the coldness in his eyes was starting to send unpleasant shivers down her spine.

She would be direct, to the point. And she would simply ask. Perhaps the ability to actually cede to a request was a skill the man had acquired in her missing time. She doubted, but she hoped.

Her strategy started with tea. Every morning since her accident, without fail, Malfoy woke before her and had tea ready and waiting whenever she emerged from the bedroom. Her logic, stretched as it might be, was that if she began the day with a gesture, making his tea instead, he might be more receptive towards her request.

That Saturday morning, Hermione woke intent on delivering her small gesture. She had to pull Crookshanks away from the bedroom door

where he pawed for release as she dressed quickly. Her enormous wardrobe of pieces far too formal for her liking still intimidated her most days, but she'd discovered that there were a couple of easy blouses that she could wear with her denim and still feel comfortable. She opted for a burgundy top that morning: a simple vee neck, flowing sleeves, and a pretty blousing quality when tucked in at the hips.

Pleased with herself, Hermione scooped Crookshanks up and opened the bedroom door as quietly as possible. Shadows greeted her in the hallway; she'd risen before the sun. She crept quietly on the wooden floors, wary of the boards that creaked. She was genuinely looking forward to doing something nice for the distant man she lived with. She frowned when she saw the kettle already on and Malfoy sitting on the green monstrosity that was both his bed and the living room sofa. A soft light drifted over the room from a nearby lamp. He had a slew of parchments sprawled across the length of both coffee tables that were wedged into the tight space, studying them intently.

"Honestly, do you even sleep?" Hermione asked, shoulders dropping as she let Crookshanks escape her arms. The cat immediately bounded towards Malfoy, trotting carelessly atop his papers and demanding attention.

"Not well," Malfoy ceded, picking up the cat and setting him aside. He moved to stand but Hermione motioned for him to stop.

"You made the tea, I can at least prepare my own cup," she said, noting that he already had one of his own beside him. Hermione could already see the distant look of his Occlumency shifting his posture, changing the depth of his eyes. Hermione sighed, preparing her tea and grabbing a treat for Crookshanks before she returned to the living room.

With a careful step over the stacks of books that had been relegated to the floor with Malfoy's takeover of the coffee tables, Hermione headed for the large leather chair on the far side of the room. Treat in hand, she lured Crookshanks away from whatever work Malfoy had in front of him.

Despite his distance, it struck her how normal the whole scene felt, how very much like a home. She looked to Malfoy, already reabsorbed in the parchments in front of him. The apprehension she often felt towards him was noticeably absent, creating space for something else. If he'd just stop occluding every second he was around her, she might

not even mind being in his company.

Her eyes caught on one of the parchments in front of him.

“Is that the Hogwarts crest?” she asked.

He stilled and Hermione felt it scraping at her skin, always so controlled.

“It is.”

“What is all that, if you don’t mind my asking?” She tried a polite tone, too formal for her tastes, but something she hoped wouldn’t send him further shuttering himself away.

“I’m working on an application."

“An application?”

Malfoy sat straighter, leaning back from where he’d been craned over his work, and adopted an almost defensive posture. Hermione tensed out of reflex. That’s what all his caution and distance did to her, it amplified the minefield she felt like she was walking in every interaction. One day she’d be picking shrapnel out of her skull and it wouldn’t surprise her in the least.

“For the Potions Master posting.”

Hermione hadn’t expected that.

“As in, teaching? Children? At Hogwarts?” Ah. As soon as she’d said the words she realized that was the reaction he’d been preparing for.

“Precisely.”

Hermione’s brows furrowed. “But you’d have to teach. You’d have to teach children,” she said as if the fact weren’t obvious.

“I have a potions mastery, I’d like to put it to use.”

“Teaching children?”

“I like children.”

Hermione blinked, confusion clouding her. Draco Malfoy liked kids? That just seemed so—sweet. Another thought struck her.

“Do you think the Board of Governors would let someone with your history teach children, though?”

Oh. She’d been wrong. That was the reaction he’d been preparing himself for. She regretted the question as soon as she’d voiced it, silently cursing her mouth for working faster than her brain.

The muscles in his face seemed to slacken, a blunt object behind his eyes chipping away at the last layers of feeling until his stare was but a single block of ice.

His voice had no lilt, no life when he spoke. “Considering Minerva has rejected my applications the last two years in a row, it does not appear that the Board of Governors is comfortable with allowing a former Death Eater to mold young minds, no.”

“I didn’t mean it like that—"

“It’s a relevant question,” he stated simply.

“Can you please stop?” she asked, strategy and tact abandoned. “Stop with the occlumency. I’d say it’s like talking to a ghost, but you’re much less lively than a ghost like this.”

“I need it,” he said, voice unwavering in its calmness.

“You don’t,” she insisted. “I just— I’d like to actually talk to you and not whatever this shell is.”

“Even if I’m cruel?” he asked in the same way someone might ask if they preferred one lump or two in their afternoon tea.

Hermione swallowed, a hand absently running through Crookshank’s fur. No, she didn’t want him to be cruel. But she didn’t want him to be absent, either.

“Did you have to use Occlumency much before—I mean, before I lost my memories?” It was a hard question to ask, the words sticking in her throat. It had become increasingly difficult to acknowledge the absence of that time from her life before as each new day brought her further into this version of her life *after*. That line, between the *before* and the *after* felt so immutably defined but somehow still so hazy in her brain that she tried to avoid the thought of it altogether.

“Only in the beginning,” he said.

“Well, then. I seem to have managed your usual reactions just fine for a number of years, I’m sure I could handle it now.”

“I don’t—" he started.

“Please Malfoy,” she nearly begged. “I really don’t think I can take it anymore.”

She watched him carefully. If anything, he seemed to draw himself even further inward, shards of self whittling to nearly nothing behind his eyes. And then, it began to reverse. The eery placidity of his features grew tense and then calm in waves, as if seeking outward control instead of inward, struggling towards an equilibrium. The hard line of his brow softened, then furrowed, before relaxing again. And the ice behind his eyes melted into something lukewarm.

“Thank you,” she muttered, acknowledging what must have been a tremendous show of self-control to both employ that magic and manage his emotions simultaneously.

“Don’t thank me yet,” he said, a quip on the edge of a snap. He grimaced immediately. Hermione saw his apology brewing.

“Please don’t apologize. I feel like I’m going to have to build a monument to your martyrdom if you keep this up.”

That earned her a strangled sound from Malfoy as he looked at her, confusion clear and easily readable across his face. He looked like he was waiting for her to take it back.

“I’m serious Malfoy. All this silent suffering you're doing is admirable, in a way, but misguided.”

A flash of anger darted across his face. She didn’t give him a chance to act or speak on it.

“But you’re allowed to be you in your own home. Please no more Occlumency, just talk to me like you normally would.”

He stared at her a minute longer, unreadable. Briefly, Hermione wondered if perhaps he’d called upon his Occlumency again and she’d missed the signs. But instead, he let out a whooshing breath with a strangled half-laugh. “Gods, I miss you.”

Hermione’s shoulders tensed. He must have caught the reflex because she saw him start to retreat again.

“It’s okay, please don’t—"

“I didn’t even mean to say it—"

“We’re going to have to actually talk about something other than tea and Crookshanks eventually, Malfoy,” she said. “And I can—that’s what I’m saying. I will. I’m—more ready. Than I was before.” When did words become so difficult? There was once a time when she could be counted upon to be articulate, even in Malfoy’s presence.

Malfoy had a palm resting on his knee, fingers squeezing as he digested what she’d said. He pressed his other hand against his thigh, methodically cracking the joints in his knuckles one by one. They were small motions, acts of thinking. They were the idle things that people did when their mind wasn’t constantly on the defensive. Hermione watched the small movements with a sense of awe. It felt like he’d risen from the dead, a ghost no more.

“I have to go,” he finally said with a strained reluctance in his voice.

“Please don’t,” Hermione asked, actually begging now.

“No, I really do have to—Potter is meeting me at St. Mungo’s. He has to, ah—"

“Why do you need to go to the hospital? Is everything alright?” A hot rush of anxiety, the same she’d felt upon waking to bright lights and lime green robes, came flooding back.

“No I’m fine—or, I will be. We have to talk to the legal department.” He cast his gaze downward, his mouth pinched.

“The legal department,” Hermione repeated. “At St. Mungo’s.”

“Potter has to tell them in person that he’s not pressing charges.”

“Pressing charges.” Not a question, just a confused repetition of his words.

“Assault charges. From when I broke his nose breaking into your room, you’d just woken up you probably don’t even remember—"

“Oh, I remember.”

Malfoy’s face snapped up, looking straight at her. Hermione held her mouth as still as she could manage, trying desperately to suppress the smile that pulled at her cheeks. Malfoy looked absolutely horrified. A

faint pink crept up the sides of his neck.

He stood and began shuffling his collection of papers on the coffee table, saying nothing. Hermione found it more and more difficult not to smile. A small chuckle escaped her.

Malfoy froze at the noise, mid-parchment-gathering. He muttered something under his breath and grabbed for the wand in his pocket. With a quick spell, the parchments went flying into a pile on the kitchen table and the displaced stacks of books were returned to the coffee tables.

“Right, well—with this lovely bout of mortification out in the open, I do actually have to go meet Potter now.”

“How long do you imagine you’ll be?” It was the first time she’d ever asked such a thing, the implication that she was curious when he’d be back hung between them.

“If I’m lucky, all day. If I’m not, perhaps I’ll see you for your birthday.”

“But my birthday is in—"

“I know when your birthday is, Hermione.” His tone was crisp, not exactly kind, but not cruel either. He had those crinkles at the corners of his eyes that suggested maybe, just maybe, he was having a little laugh at her.

And she didn’t quite know what to do with that.

“Right,” she said. “Of course you do. Well, good luck then.”

—

Hermione tried reorganizing the abundance of books in the flat on her Saturday afternoon alone. They were everywhere: cluttering the living room, encroaching onto kitchen surfaces, stacked two deep in every bookcase, and starting to create their own alternative seating options in the bedroom with how high some of the towers stood.

The mess had been bothering her since the moment she walked into the flat for the first time, or rather, not exactly the first time, in

January. Now nearing the middle of March and no longer feeling like the entire space belonged to Malfoy (one just had to look past all the silver and green), she'd had enough of the chaos and needed to sort the books into some kind of useable system. What if she wanted to retrieve a specific title, or look for grouped subjects, or explore a particular author? It was appalling.

And yet, after an hour of huffing and hauling books around the flat, her hair expanding in tandem with her frustration, Hermione had to admit defeat.

In an annoying and altogether unexpected series of events, the books were already organized in the best configuration she could come up with, regardless of how haphazard it appeared. Which meant she'd already done all that work once before and had been engaged in a battle of organizational wills with her past self. She found that both annoying and a little bit ridiculous.

She tied her long curls back at the base of her neck and beckoned for Crookshanks to join her as moral support in her defeat as she collapsed onto the green tufted nightmare that was the velvet sofa.

A flash from the fireplace sent her and Crookshanks jumping.

The only thing that kept Hermione from reflexively hexing the stranger that walked through the Floo was her knowledge of the wards in the flat. If someone could get through, it meant the wards were keyed to allow it. It meant that she and Malfoy allowed it.

The stranger was a tall, rather narrow man. He had dark hair cropped close to his head and eyes so green that it was almost like looking at Harry. He stood stiffly, his head tilted to one side as he watched her watching him.

"Shit. Tell me you at least know my name? We went to school together for seven years, after all. I know we weren't friendly but come on—"

"Theodore Nott," she said. "Right?"

"Oh, thank Merlin. My pride was not going to survive if you didn't actually know who I am."

His posture loosened as he bent to greet Crookshanks. Evidently the cat had a soft spot for Slytherins.

“Um, Theodore,” she began.

“Theo, Merlin, you’re not my governess.”

Hermione cleared her throat. “Right, Theo. Not to be rude, but why are you in my living room?”

Theo stood, cat in his arms, and gave her a conspiratorial sort of grin.

“I’m risking my life,” he said simply.

“Risking your life?” Hermione parroted. This certainly was not how she’d imagined this afternoon going.

“At the very least my limbs and precious bits. Draco can be very creative and very explicit in his threat making.” Theo had started swaying with Crookshanks in his grip, almost like he was dancing with the cat. The sight of it pitched Hermione squarely between wanting to giggle and wanting to lock herself in a different room at the sheer horror of it.

“Malfoy doesn’t want you here?”

Theo’s head titled again.

“No, *Draco* was very clear he doesn’t think you’re ready for the glory that is our friendship. I’m calling bullshit on that and kidnapping you.”

Intellectually, Hermione knew that statement should have sent up all kinds of warning flags in her brain. Instead, she found herself rolling her eyes and settling further back into the green sofa.

“I’m not sure you can call it kidnapping if you tell me beforehand.”

Theo grumbled a noise of disagreement as he walked into the kitchen, still cradling her cat. Hermione craned to see him helping himself to Crookshank’s treats. It was a surreal sort of moment, having Theodore Nott, a relative stranger to her, feeding Crookshanks treats and walking about her flat as if he’d been there hundreds of times.

Hermione’s stomach sank, another landmine blowing up on her. Here was a man she barely knew despite going to school with him for years, who now apparently knew her well enough to invite himself over and dote on her cat, and yet, she recalled nothing about him other than the last time she saw him during her NEWTs. It was a strange sort of

grief, wanting for what she'd known once but didn't know now. The distinctions were difficult to manage.

"Oh, hey, no no. Sad Granger is not invited to this kidnapping, put her away," Theo said as he returned from the kitchen. Crookshanks purred happily, the house traitor.

Hermione straightened, not realizing her internal spiral had shown on her face.

"Sorry," she said. "It's just—strange." It occurred to her that he was still standing in the flat with a cat in his arms. "Did you want to"—she gestured to the sofa—"sit? Or something?" She winced as she said it. Her hostessing skills, in whatever meager quantity she'd once had them, were sorely out of practice.

He looked appalled.

"Granger, even if I wasn't a horrendously wealthy man, there aren't enough galleons in all of Gringotts to convince me to sit on that—*thing."*

Her brows furrowed. She scanned the sofa, looking for the offense, other than its color and shape and overall obnoxiousness, of course.

"Why not—"

"Not the time. Come on Granger; we're going out." He released Crookshanks and offered her an arm, not entirely unlike how Malfoy had tried prior to the 'disaster dinner.'

"Would you rather side along or Floo?" he asked.

Hermione clasped her hands together, the far edges of her self-preservation rapidly approached the forefront of her mind. "Are you expecting me to just let you take me somewhere? You do realize that, for me, this is literally the first full conversation we've ever had, don't you?"

Theo let out a dramatic sigh. "And it's been just lovely thus far, hasn't it? I'm always a pleasure, I'm aware. Now quit acting like you're not brave enough to do this before I dare you and give your Gryffindor sensibilities no choice in the matter."

"And you say we're friends?" Hermione asked, as much a question as a challenge.

“Yes, because I’m a pleasure. We’ve just established this. Side along or Floo, Granger? We haven’t got all day.”

Hermione tried. Really she did. She tried listening to her instincts and not the constant cloud of confusion in her brain. And while her brain stuttered at the idea of leaving her flat with a relative stranger, her instincts were mostly at ease. And that was a strange feeling, but not entirely unwelcome. It was nice, in a way, to just accept something simple and not think it into the ground.

“Fine. Side along,” she said as she stood and looped his arm before her brain could stop her.

The smirk on Theo’s face as they disapparated did not escape her notice. She wondered if he learned it from Malfoy.

—

“Diagon Alley?” she asked after her lungs expanded, squeezed back into existence.

“Where’d you think I was bringing you? Your doom?” Theo chuckled, making no motion to release the hold he had on her arm looped in his. “It’s time for trawling,” he announced.

“As in fishing?” Hermione asked.

“I am a fisher of men,” he said with a grin.

Hermione froze, her arm pulled forward by the half step Theo took before realizing she’d stopped.

“Did you just quote the *Bible?”* she hissed in a low voice, utterly at a loss at how to comprehend a pureblooded wizard quoting muggle religion with a side of innuendo, if she'd caught his meaning correctly.

He pulled her to keep walking. “I’m quoting *you,* obviously. Unless—wait. Is my favorite Granger quote *plagiarized?”*

Hermione’s mouth had dropped open and the only thing preventing her from sinking to the ground was the combination of Theo’s grip and his forward momentum.

“I might have lifted that from a religious text,” she admitted, feeling a little blasphemous despite the fact that she was quite literally a witch.

“And you repurposed it to suit my boyfriend hunting efforts?” He gave her arm a friendly squeeze, a huge grin monopolizing his features. *“This* is why we’re such good friends. I’m not even going to complain about how long you spend in Flourish and Blotts today. This has put me in such a good mood.”

Hermione felt a little unmoored. She’d expected to spend her day doing more research after organizing books. She’d planned to sit with her cat in her lap, tea at her side, and a book in her hands. And somehow instead, she found herself walking arm in arm with Theodore Nott as he steered her towards Flourish and Blotts. His grip on her arm finally released as he opened the door for her.

“Go wild Granger,” he teased. Though she partly wanted to smack him for it, she couldn’t help the excitement that bloomed in her chest as she entered the bookstore. Gods, the smell of it alone sent her head spinning. She needed to do this more. She’d missed this sense of excitement commingled with satisfaction.

But with a bit of a frown, she remembered the library’s worth of tomes already choking her small flat.

“I don’t know that we have room for any new books at home,” she started, regret lacing every word. She’d already locked eyes with an especially interesting new release that touted a glowing foreword by Miranda Goshawk. Her fingers itched to inspect it.

Theo barked a laugh from behind her. “Don’t ruin my day now, Granger. Forcing you to add to that insane collection is one of my favorite pastimes.” He leaned casually against the shelf beside her. “And not just because it gets Draco all worked up, though that is certainly an added benefit.”

“Are you sure we’re friends?” she asked, giving in to the desire to inspect the book. She could allow herself just one small peek at a pretty new release.

“Of course we are,” he said without blinking, a tiny line forming between his brows. “But I have a confession."

Miranda Goshawk’s foreword insisted that the book in Hermione’s hands would become the new definitive work for high-level potions instruction, finally supplanting Libatius Borage’s long-standing

classroom favorite, *Advanced Potion Making*.

“Confession?” she asked absently as she traced the table of contents.

“I did not kidnap without motive,” Theo said, gently pulling the book from her hands. “We’ll get this for Draco in a second."

“I was looking at it for me,” she said with a half-hearted attempt to pull the book back.

“Liar. But this is about me, remember, I have a confession.”

Hermione tapped her foot, hands on her hips, waiting patiently so that she could get the book back. Ignoring, illogically, the dozens of other copies sitting nearby.

“I need to give you some tough love,” he said, flipping idly through the book he’d stolen from her. “Huh,” he mused. “Reminds me of Slughorn’s class. No thanks.” He pushed off of the shelf and made a gesture to the cashier on the other side of the shop. He held the book up and pointed to it, then to himself before heading towards the exit.

“Where are you going?” Hermione asked. “I still need to pay for—"

“I had them put it on my account.” Theo held the door open for her again.

“You don’t need to—"

“Do you have any money with you?” he asked, an infuriating smirk worming its way onto his face.

“I—no.” She hadn’t been thinking, clearly, when she let him take her on this ridiculous excursion-cum-kidnapping disguised as boyfriend hunting. All she’d brought was her wand and her wits, the latter of which seemed to be under review at the given time.

“Let’s grab a table at the Leaky,” Theo said, still waiting for her to step through the door and back out onto the street. “Tough love isn’t really a street conversation. The peasants might overhear.”

Hermione finally moved, brushing past him with an indignant huff. “Peasants? Honestly.”

“I know you think it’s funny Granger,” he said. Even trailing a step behind her, his chuckle was unmistakable. “You’ve laughed at it before.”

Hermione walked faster.

—

Hermione eyed her ex-classmate as he slid a pint across the table towards her.

“It’s two o’clock in the afternoon,” she said.

“It’s the weekend,” Theo replied, clinking his pint with hers even though it still sat untouched on the table. She hadn’t decided if she was actually annoyed with him or not, but she rolled her eyes anyway and took a sip of her drink.

“You might not realize it, Granger, but you’ve definitely missed me.”

Another eye roll. Begrudgingly, Hermione had to admit there was something easy about being in Theo’s company, peculiar as it may be.

“So, what’s this tough love you’ve kidnapped me for?” she asked, cutting to the point. Directness had already served her well once that day.

He set his pint down, looking unsure of himself for the first time since he came swaggering into her flat unannounced.

He cleared his throat. “Well—first. I’d like to start by saying fuck Draco.” A pause, presumably for effect. “And honestly, fuck scarhead and the weaslette, too, for treating you like you’re some kind of broken little bird that has to be hand-fed from a censored list of information about her own life.”

Hermione began his rant slightly offended and ended it confused and, weirdly, reassured. She flushed.

“It’s been almost three months for Merlin’s sake,” Theo continued. “I’m firmly of the belief that Hermione Granger can handle fucking anything. And feel free to tell them all that in my eulogy when Draco kills me for this kidnapping.”

“I—wow.” Hermione felt truly stunned. “Thank you? But I haven’t really been ready, either—” She didn’t know what to say or how to say it. His words and his unexpected confidence washed over her with

a sort of unreal quality to them.

“Don’t hedge. They should push you more. And you’re welcome. Though I feel I should mediate my compliments with a reminder that you are also quite annoying. And a damn menace when you drink. But generally speaking, nobody’s giving you enough credit right now.” He took another enormous gulp of his beer before continuing.

“The fucks for Draco and the Potters were just the introduction to what I actually wanted to talk about, something for you to remember when you’re considering hexing me. Actually, any chance I could hold onto your wand while we do this?”

Hermione narrowed her eyes. “Not a chance.”

He let out a breath. “Worth an ask.”

Silence stretched between them. Theo found something in his beer extremely fascinating, tapping his fingers against the glass and staring. Finally, his gaze snapped up to Hermione and he spoke.

“You’re killing him.”

Hermione startled from the suddenness of the accusation. “Malfoy?”

“No. Not Malfoy. *Draco,* the guy who bound his life, soul, and magic to your swotty arse until the end of time. And as his best friend, I literally cannot take it anymore. He’s losing his gods damned mind *and* drinking all my good scotch.”

“I—”

“Not your turn, Granger.”

She sat back against the booth, honestly stunned by the force with which he’d stopped her interruption.

“He’s been sleeping on a sofa—*that* sofa—for almost three months. Do you even realize that? Rhetorical question, by the way, now that I’ve started I can’t stop. His back is shot, he’s got a knot in his neck he won’t stop complaining about and the man is *starving* for affection. Which is a weird thing for me to know about him, but that’s where we are right now. You’ve been reacquainted with me for all of what? An hour? And we’ve side alonged and walked arm in arm down the street, but you haven’t so much as touched the man since you—”

“That’s different—”

“Still not done,” he snapped, his demeanor for the first time reminding her of his house, of the Slytherin sneer and wielding of words like weapons. “And then there’s the whole *Malfoy* situation. We’re not kids anymore, you could try using his first name, for fuck’s sake. I’m starting to think he’s keeping track of every time you avoid using it and he’s taking shots of my good liquor for each offense.”

Hermione jumped when he reached across the table and tapped the fourth finger on her left hand. “And you haven’t even asked about this? Have you? I’m pretty sure he assumed you’d at least ask about it, curiosity and all, but you haven’t said a damn thing. It’s a beautiful ring, you know. Even I don’t hate it and I think the two of you have terrible taste.”

The hardness on Theo’s face wilted as he took a deep breath. “Ok, that’s it. That was the tough love.”

Hermione opened her mouth to say something but had to close it again. She took a sip of her drink. She opened her mouth again, and then had to blink away the tears that surprised her.

Theo groaned and leaned his head back against the booth, looking towards the ceiling. “I made you cry,” he said. “Draco might *actually* kill me.”

“They’re just overwhelmed tears,” she said, already wrangling them under control. “That was—a lot.”

Theo kept his head tilted towards the sky as if seeking absolution. “If you did want to hex me, now’s your chance,” he mumbled.

“I’m not going to hex you.”

He looked back down at her, studying.

“So where do you want to start, then?” he asked.

“Start? With all that?” She released a nervous laugh, already drowning in so-called tough love.

“I seem to recall you trying to interrupt on more than one occasion.”

“He’s told you—all that?” Hermione asked, an uncomfortable feeling of exposure settling in her stomach.

“Some of it. Other parts are inferred. I’m fairly skilled at reading between the lines.”

“Well he hasn’t told me any of it, between the lines or otherwise, because he’s been occluding almost every second of every day for the last month,” Hermione snapped, frustration rising to the surface. “I just barely managed to get him to drop some of it this morning.”

Theo held his hands up in mock defense. “Look, I am absolutely against Draco using Occlumency as much as he is. That dinner you guys had might have fucked him up a little bit. But if you got him to stop, maybe now’s a good time to—I don’t know, something.”

Hermione bit at her bottom lip, rotating her now mostly empty pint in front of her, anything to keep her hands occupied. She’d known the dinner was bad, even with her apology and her insistence that it wasn’t what it looked like. But it seemed that just the act of having to endure it broke whatever confidence Malfoy had in his composure.

“So what’s different about it?” Theo asked quietly.

“About what?”

“You said it’s different when I was talking about touching me versus touching him.”

“I’m not married to you.”

“Which should make it easier, I’d think,” Theo said.

Hermione let out a long sigh. “No, gods, it makes it so much harder. There’s so much—expectation attached, because of the marriage thing. Touching him would be—would mean, there’s just—” Hermione broke off, gripping her hair at the roots, frustrated more than anything about her inability to use words like a fully functioning adult. Her brain kept shouting out sentiments that she couldn’t keep track of. She let out a strangled sort of noise and pressed her forehead against the wooden table in a show of resignation, ignoring the cold splotch of condensation she’d landed on.

“Hermione?” Theo asked. She hummed that she’d heard him from her position face to face with a bar table. “Well, I’m not going to lie and say that made any sense,” Theo said. “Care to try again?”

She lifted her head, wiping off the patch of wetness above her right eye. Theo didn’t even have the good graces not to look amused.

Hermione took a bracing breath and started again. “There’s history. And I don’t know the history and it’s driving me a little mad. I’m just now figuring out how to talk to the man, but touch? What does it mean? What’s a casual touch, what’s more? Do we touch a lot? Do we keep to ourselves? Do we *cuddle?* It’s just a floodgate I’m not ready to open.”

Theo considered her words with a frown, fingers steepled in front of his face in what looked like an admirable impersonation of Severus Snape.

“Alright, that was better,” he finally said. “I’ll give it an ‘Acceptable.’”

“An ‘A?’ Are you serious? I’ve never gotten an Acceptable on anything in my—"

Theo was laughing at her. Actually laughing at her mere moments after her twisted meltdown. And for some reason, Hermione couldn’t help but laugh back, a different kind of floodgate breaking. As their laughter abated, Theo’s face drew together with seriousness again.

“In an effort to protect my good alcohol, maybe just start with his name? I promise you, it would mean a lot to him.” He grimaced. “Merlin, sincerity tastes awful.”

Hermione nodded. She could do that. She could try it at least. And she wanted to. She needed some measure of control over the narrative of her life.

“Thanks, Theo,” she told him, meaning it. “I won’t mention the kidnapping. If you’d rather I didn’t, that is.”

Theo’s whole face lit up as he grinned, a proud sort of fondness taking over. “This is why we work so well, Granger. You *get* me. I didn’t even have to ask.” He lowered his voice, leaning partway over the table. “ Now can we try to find me a boyfriend? We’re losing daylight here.”

—

“You wear reading glasses?” Hermione couldn’t help but ask at the sight of Malfoy on the velvet sofa, book in hand, and a pair of simple black frames perched on his face.

He pulled them off as soon as she spoke, clearing his throat as he looked up at her. Her apparition had been nearly silent, she'd clearly caught him off guard.

"Ah— yes, sometimes."

Hermione smiled. They were fitting, in a way.

"You're not occluding," she observed.

"Against my better judgment, no I am not."

"Well, I appreciate it."

"I should disclose I'm in a horrendous mood. I was at the hospital for hours."

Cautiously, Hermione took a step towards the sofa.

"Did you and Harry get everything settled?" she asked.

"Eventually. We were made to wait quite unnecessarily, though. Potter eventually had to pull the *I'm Harry Potter* card, which is always a little nauseating to watch."

Hermione chuckled and he looked buoyed by her reaction, as if he hadn't expected her to find any humor in it.

"You didn't try pulling the *I'm Draco Malfoy* card?" It was a joke, but also a test of his name, of the shape of it in her mouth, of the feeling of it against her tongue, of the lingering effects of it in her throat.

His posture shifted and he shook his head. "That one hasn't worked in quite some time."

"Oh," she more mouthed than said, conversation lulling. She stood a few steps from the sofa. A few steps from a decision to do something different, to try. Her feet had walked her to and from much more frightening destinations than a piece of furniture occupied by Draco Malfoy, and yet, she stood immobile.

Malfoy arched a brow at her, eyes catching on the distinctly book-shaped package in her hands.

"Another book?" he asked, a tiny smirk on his face. "I was getting worried we didn't have enough."

It was enough to propel her into motion. She walked the remaining steps towards the sofa and sat next to him, sideways so she could face his profile, legs crossed beneath her. With a deep breath or simple shift, her knees could brush up against the fabric of his trousers. She almost wanted them to.

She held up the book, offering it to him. “It’s for you, actually."

He didn’t react immediately, adjusting to her proximity. He’d gone still, almost vacant for a split second before he drew a breath. He shifted his torso so he could better face her, question and suspicion warring their way across his face.

She held the book closer to him. “Take it,” she urged.

He took the book from her and removed the brown paper packaging from the shop. His eyes widened as he read the title. Silently, he flipped the book over to inspect the back. He flipped it again, opening it to the dedication, the title page, the table of contents, and then the foreword. Hermione watched, enraptured.

Still silent, he closed the book and looked back up at her.

“I was considering getting this later in the week,” he said. “Thank you.”

If someone had suggested to Hermione in 2001 that giving Draco Malfoy a gift and watching him love it would send her stomach fluttering, she’d have jinxed them after laughing uncontrollably at the idea.

But Hermione couldn’t deny the pride that swelled in her chest, seeing him appreciate it. He’d already returned to flipping through the pages, entirely unaware of the effect his response had on her. She took another step.

“Hey Malfoy—Draco,” she said, berating herself for the hesitation.

His head snapped up, searching her.

“I was wondering,” she started, apprehension nearly stalling her. She pushed through it. “Could you tell me some—about us, I mean. I’m ready to hear, I think.”

He broke eye contact, looking down at the book in his hands. Carefully, almost reverently, he placed it down on the coffee table and

twisted further towards her. He felt guarded again, like she'd lost some of the ground she'd gained, all the steps she'd taken.

"What would you like to know?" he asked.

"You're not occluding again, are you?"

"Just for a moment; I've already stopped," he admitted with a hint of contrition. "I wasn't expecting that."

"If you're going to tell me about"—she made a small gesture motioning between them—"us, I'd much rather you do so with your emotions intact."

"You are aware you're relentless, aren't you?" he asked, letting out a breath.

"I get the sense you've probably mentioned it before."

Was it too soon? Could they try to have a sense of humor about it? She didn't breathe as her words hit him.

He tapped a hand against his thigh, thoughtful. "You're not wrong."

She felt a smile forming.

"So, Draco." It felt as foreign to say as she'd expected it to, but she'd committed. "How did we go from sorting through dark objects in your ancestral home to..." she trailed off.

If it surprised him that she knew about her project with the Ministry, he didn't let it show. Instead, he frowned.

"I can't speak for you," he started. "We've talked, of course, but I couldn't possibly explain it for you."

Hermione shrank, looking down. She reached for a curl dangling over her shoulder, seeking something to do with her hands in her disappointment.

"But I suppose I could tell you about when I knew."

She looked back up at him, a tension pulling taut in the space between their eyes.

"I found you one day," he said. "In the drawing room. Which was locked and warded, by the way. You broke in."

He let out a low laugh and Hermione had to look away. She felt him still.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I forgot it’s closer for you, the time since it happened.”

She shook her head. “It’s okay, keep going.”

She swallowed, risking a look back up at him. But he wasn’t even watching her anymore. His gaze had shifted past her, distant in a way entirely different from when he used Occlumency. He could see what she couldn’t, a shared memory that lived in only one of their minds.

“I didn’t go in,” he said. “I couldn't. But I watched, from the door, as you stood exactly where it happened, just staring at the carpets. You were muttering to yourself, I was genuinely worried for you for a moment.”

He looked back at her.

“It was spring. You had the sleeves of your cardigan pushed up because it was warm during the day.” His gaze shifted to her left forearm. “You refused to glamour it, so the letters were right there on your arm as you stood in the spot where they’d been carved. I couldn’t even enter the room without feeling like I was about to vomit or pass out and there you were, standing there like it was nothing.”

Maybe Hermione regretted this. Asking to hear. But she couldn’t bring herself to tell him to stop. Not now that he’d finally broken open a tiny piece of himself and offered it to her.

“You stood really still, closed your eyes, and just—sort of existed in that spot. I think I held my breath the entire time. A few minutes later you simply turned and left; you didn’t even seem surprised to find me watching. I asked what you were doing. It was one of the most bizarre things I’d ever seen. And do you know what you said?”

She did.

But not because she remembered it. She knew because it made sense; it’s what she would have done now, what she had done in a different life. And somehow, the memory of it and the instinct towards it wound their way together.

“I wasn’t letting her win.”

Malfoy froze, searching her face with an unmasked hope that made her chest hurt. Such a stark contrast to the cold distance of his Occlumency.

“I don’t remember,” she told him. “I just know.”

A muscle in his jaw twitched, but he nodded.

“It’s not as if the famous Gryffindor bravery is a secret,” he continued. “But I’d never seen anything like that. That same night, I started experimenting with potions to remove the scar for you. I’d watched you beat it, beat her. You didn’t need to remove it, but I wanted nothing more than to give you the choice.”

“And I used it,” she said. “Obviously.”

She shifted slightly, her knees almost touching him: a distance of almost nothing and somehow, everything.

“Did you use it too?” she asked, glancing at his left arm. She couldn’t recall seeing the Dark Mark on him, but her opportunities hadn’t exactly been abundant.

He caught her meaning, his right hand reaching to touch his forearm from over his shirt. Hermione noticed the glint of his wedding band on his left hand. The absence of jewelry on her own hand felt heavy on her bones.

“No,” he said. “I didn’t.”

Her eyes narrowed as she watched him gripping at his arm.

“Why not?” she finally asked.

“Because he won.”

Hermione didn’t know what to say to that, how to break that down. Ignoring the obvious fact that Voldemort objectively did not win, she didn’t know how to translate his meaning from his words.

So she just watched him as he did the same to her: a study in silent conversation. It was amazing, that moment. A cease-fire in her mind where Draco Malfoy wasn’t *Draco Malfoy,* but just the man in front of her. The man who, as Theo had said, had bound his life, soul, and magic to her. And despite all reason, she felt like she was beginning to understand.

Crookshanks hopped onto her lap, breaking her focus and bringing a smile to her face.

“I think I’m going to go to bed,” she said, giving the cat a series of scratches behind his ears.

Draco nodded from beside her and shifted slightly away, creating space. Hermione rose, Crookshanks in her arms. She paused before heading towards the bedroom.

“Draco?” she asked. It was an unnecessary question; his eyes hadn’t stopped following her. She already had his attention. “Why not transfigure the sofa into a bed at least? Make it a little more comfortable?”

He ran a hand along the green velvet beside him, a smile playing at his lips. “Some things are too precious,” he said.

That was enough of an answer for now.

Chapter End Notes

i love and appreciate kudos and comments if you feel so inclined to let me know what you think!! also, come hang out with me on tumblr, its a good time!

art inspired by this chapter:
Draco on the Sofa by chestercompany

Chapter 4: Ginevra Potter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Often we pass beside happiness without seeing it, without looking at it, or even if we have seen and looked at it, without recognizing it.”

— Alexandre Dumas, The Count of Monte Cristo

—

April

Hermione might not have opened all the floodgates, but she’d certainly opened some of them. And rather than being swept to sea as she might have expected, she found herself awash in Malfoy’s—no, Draco’s—mannerism: a version of him she didn’t even know existed. The whirlpool she’d found herself in when she looked into his eyes after leaving the hospital had started spinning faster, pulling her in, orbiting them both around some unknown force at the center that drew them either towards drowning or dry land.

“What should I even wear to a one year old’s birthday party?” Hermione asked, exasperation rising as she stood at the door to the closet feeling utterly out of her depth. She’d spent a few afternoons with James in the last couple of months but her interactions with Albus had been mostly limited to watching him sleep, sometimes cry, and occasionally babble a word or two.

Draco appeared at the door to the bedroom, which she’d left open without even considering the novelty of it. Another barrier bypassed in the strangeness of getting to know the man she lived with. He did, however, continue to treat the room as off-limits when she was in it, an honorable attempt at respecting boundaries. But presently, she needed help picking something to wear and all Draco seemed interested in doing was leaning against the door frame, hands in his pockets and legs crossed at the ankles, looking far too amused at Hermione’s bewilderment.

She narrowed her eyes at him.

“Oh, quit looking so smug and please help.”

“As the lady commands,” he intoned. With just a hint of hesitation, he stepped into the room. “Considering this fete will be happening at The Burrow with a veritable army of redheads in attendance, let’s start by avoiding reds and oranges. The eyes can only handle so much.”

He turned sideways and slipped by her into the closet. He rummaged for a moment before pulling out a simple sundress in one hand, a cardigan in the other. Hermione hadn’t even known those pieces existed until that very moment. Part of her wondered if there was an undetectable extension charm cast on the closet and she just hadn’t noticed it yet.

“A green dress and a black cardigan?” she asked, suspicious. “Don’t you think that’s a little on the nose for a pride of lions?”

“They all know where your loyalties lie,” he told her, still holding out the clothes. His face was blank, features level, but not occluded. She inferred the smirk more than she saw it.

“And where do my loyalties lie, exactly?” she pushed, knowing they were already on the edge of something fragile. The fire of a friendly banter in such close proximity could only be contained for so long until all the oxygen got used up and the flame died.

She took the dress but decided on a denim jacket instead.

He simply shrugged, not answering her question. But as he slipped back by her, exiting the closet, he stepped much closer into her personal space, smirk so close she could taste it if she wanted to. His eyes passed over her, heavy in their path from her eyes to her lips. In the next moment he was already exiting the room, never pausing in his strategic retreat. He left behind the scent of spice and citrus dancing swirling patterns of almost-memory against her skin.

He kept doing that, pushing just a bit, just enough that she noticed it happening, but so quick that sometimes she wondered if she’d imagined it altogether. And she’d given him permission to, in a way, every time she pulled. It wasn’t often, and she didn’t feel especially skilled at it, but there were moments where she’d sit a little closer to him than necessary, where she’d let herself study him, knowing full well he noticed her gaze, where she said something nice to him, out of nowhere, and just because she could. It had become a sort of dance, his pushing, her pulling.

And she resolutely refused to give Theo any credit for it, either. Especially considering he kept owling her cheeky little letters congratulating her on achieving a first name basis with her husband. Further, he regularly requested details should any hand-holding occur. Worst of all, he only sent them to her office, so that even while she toiled over pointless paperwork, she couldn't be allowed to forget her strange home situation, or that she'd pointedly not mentioned their afternoon together to Draco.

In truth, there wasn't much Hermione could do about the subtle shift her life had taken, nor did she especially want to do anything about it. Odd as it seemed at times, there was a comfort to it too, settled inside her, slowly filling up some of the empty spaces in her head.

Hermione shut the door and pulled on the sundress. A quick glance in the dresser mirror confirmed that it was, indeed, a nice choice. She grabbed her denim jacket before double-checking the time of the party in her planner and dropping it on the foot of the bed. She joined Draco in the living room. He stood near the fireplace, idly twirling his wand between his fingers while he waited. She felt his attention snap to her as she entered the room, arresting her with his focus. It was difficult not to flush under his observation, sometimes so painfully overt in its wanting. But she'd asked him not to hide, demanded it, really. This was the price she paid.

And truth be told, in his dark trousers and black button-up that was tailored so perfectly to somehow convey both elegance and ease, Hermione wasn't always certain she didn't look at him in a similar manner. It was a self-awareness that took some getting used to.

Hermione stopped. "How do you do that?" she said before she could stop herself. A blush erupted across her cheeks.

"Do what?" he asked, pocketing his wand.

"Just—look like that." She shouldn't have said it; she wished she didn't. She had every opportunity not to, and yet, her mouth moved without permission. Her obituary would remember her as a bright young witch who died of humiliation. Shame she didn't learn to think before she spoke.

Draco's whole demeanor shifted, a gleam of something entirely too pleased flashing through his eyes.

"Look like what?" he asked, a smirk pulling at the dimple on the left side of his mouth.

“You know,” she said, wishing for a diversion, perhaps a small explosion, anything.

“I can’t say that I do. I’d love it if you educated me, though.”

“You’re awful.”

“You brought it up.”

“Just—all expensive,” she concluded. Apparently, that answer did not suffice.

Draco took two deep strides towards her, closing the gap, leaving almost no space between them.

Hermione’s heart jumped to her throat, a torrent of nerves ricocheting against her bones, trapped beneath her skin. Definitely too close. Definitely too much. Definitely too good looking for his own good.

“Was that all?” he asked. He wore no smirk. He arched no brows. It was a simple question, spoken under his breath and with a painful seriousness.

“And,” Hermione tried to continue. She paused at the feeling of his breath brushing up against her cheek. “And handsome. You look very handsome, Merlin, gods, okay let’s go.”

Hermione had never apparated in such a panic in her life.

Which included the times she’d done so while fleeing for her life.

This honestly hadn’t felt all that different.

—

“You didn’t have to leave in such a rush,” Draco said, voice drifting over her shoulder, breath prickling at the back of her neck.

Her quick escape meant nothing when they were headed to the same destination: a small path just outside The Burrow.

“I didn’t even get a chance to return the compliment,” he continued, stepping beside her and putting a little more space between them.

“Because you look beautiful.”

From her periphery, Hermione could see him angled towards her, likely trying to catch her eyes in an attempt at sincerity she wasn’t quite ready to accept. She fixed her gaze forward and started walking in the direction of red hair and various loud noises. Did baby’s birthdays always involve pyrotechnics?

“Thank you,” she said, remembering belatedly that he’d spoken, but still trying to wrangle her embarrassment under control. “If you could just try to forget the last minute ever happened I’d appreciate it.”

She stopped walking, her word choice etching a cringe into her face. She turned to face him.

“I’m sorry—I didn’t mean—"

He gave a small shake of his head. “It’s fine, I know what you meant.” He offered her a brief smile, walking to catch up with her. “But I assure you, there’s no way I could ever forget that moment. I might try conjuring a Patronus with it later.”

A flush of embarrassment returned and Hermione remained silent as they walked up to The Burrow, her first visit since January, since the accident. The pang of familiarity and fondness snuck up on her, the lack of longing did not. Much like with Ron, she could recognize the difference between the two. There would always be an attachment to this place, she supposed, and to the family who called it home, but they weren’t her family any longer, not really.

A blur of red hair engulfed Hermione in a hug.

“You’ve made it, thank Merlin. Do you realize how many brothers I have? I try to forget sometimes but they’ve all decided that Al’s first birthday is the Weasley event of the season. There’s just so much—noise,” Ginny sounded legitimately out of breath and looked exhausted to the point of delirium as she finished. A firecracker exploded somewhere on the other side of the house. Ginny winced; Hermione jumped; Draco sighed.

Ginny stepped back, releasing her, and narrowed her eyes at Draco.

“Ferret,” she said. “You know your belt doesn’t quite match your shoes, right?”

Hermione felt him tense beside her, resisting what was likely an

overwhelming urge to validate that statement.

“Weasel,” he drawled. “I trust you know lilac really isn’t your color.”

Ginny just rolled her eyes. “Harry’s already said this dress looked lovely on me.”

“Was he wearing his glasses? The man’s effectively blind without—"

His words were cut short by Ginny smacking him on the arm. “Be nice Malfoy or I won’t let you see the birthday boy.”

Not the threat Hermione expected. And certainly not the response, either. Draco folded, shamelessly and instantly.

“You wouldn’t,” he not-quite-mock gasped. “It’s been months.” There was almost, *almost* a pout forming.

Harry jogged up to meet them, looking slightly worse for wear, whether from his job or the chaos of—another small explosion sound—the party, Hermione didn’t know.

“Whatever you think she wouldn’t,” Harry said in his approach, “she probably would. She’s ruthless, my wife.” Harry offered Hermione a short hug of his own.

“I’m here to fetch you,” he told her with a failed attempt at regret.

“It’s time to face them, isn’t it?” Hermione asked. It wasn’t that she was afraid to see the entire Weasley brood again. She’d had nearly four months to wrap her brain around the idea that they weren’t as close as they used to be. It was more the density of them all in one place that gave her a moment’s pause. She allowed herself that tiny apprehension of the unknown.

“And that is my cue to find somewhere else to be,” Draco said. “Weasley’s aren’t my forte. I can really only handle this one”—he gestured to Ginny—“because of the name change. Though being a Potter is another issue altogether.”

“Do you want to see the kids or not?” Ginny snapped.

Draco lifted his brows, staring Ginny down. In the momentary battle of wills, Ginny emerged victorious. Draco sighed. “Lead the way, Weasel.” He shifted his gaze to Hermione for a passing moment before it landed on Harry.

“Have fun,” he said with zero sincerity, sounding much more like a threat.

Harry ignored Draco and instead pulled on Hermione’s arm. “Alright, let’s get this over with so we can actually enjoy the party.”

“Right,” Hermione agreed, distracted as she watched Draco and Ginny heading towards the gardens, probably still bickering, but strangely civil.

“You’re never going to get used to it,” Harry muttered, catching her focus. “I wouldn’t bother trying.” He turned to her, halting them just shy of the house. “So, here’s the plan, I’ve plotted it out just like a raid —"

“Oh, gods.”

“Ron and Lavender are with Bill and Fleur right now, we’ll stop there first, quick hellos—and it will be totally normal and not uncomfortable at all—"

“Thanks for the confidence, Harry,” Hermione mumbled.

“Just considering precedent. Also, don’t say anything about Lavender’s pregnancy. She was due on Tuesday and Ron’s said she might murder the next person who reminds her she hasn’t gone into labor yet."

“I thought she was due in two weeks?”

“The tea leaves said Tuesday,” Harry deadpanned.

“Noted,” Hermione said with equal enthusiasm.

“Percy and Charlie are in the kitchen with Molly and Arthur right now. That’ll be our biggest obstacle: four of them at once.”

“You really are treating this as a raid, aren’t you?” Hermione asked.

Harry shot her an annoyed look. “Did you know being Head Auror is mostly paperwork? This is the most danger I’ve experienced in two months, now focus. Molly is the most likely to ask a well-intended but invasive question, if and when she does, I’m pretending to hear one of the kids crying and we’re leaving.”

“Harry—"

“Now Arthur will probably defer to whatever tone Molly sets so he’s a

bit of an anomaly. Percy won't say much, probably Ministry small talk, and Charlie is only here because Molly gave him an earful about not meeting Al yet so he likely won't have much to contribute. Really, that room is all about Molly."

"Harry—"

"Then we rendezvous with our spouses and the kids behind the gardens. The unknown element there is George, he's setting up the toy quidditch pitch he's invented as if Albus can even use a broom. But I've prepped for six different scenarios depending on what sort of mood George is—"

"Harry, stop."

He looked up from where he'd started pacing small circles in the grass in front of Hermione.

"What?"

"I'm going to be fine."

"I know, I just want to make sure we're prepared—"

"Harry I'm not made of glass. I've known the Weasleys for years, with or without six of them missing. And it's been over three months, almost every conversation I have is either uncomfortable or full of well-intentioned but invasive questions. It can be a lot but—I'm fine, really I am."

Harry ran a hand along his jaw, green eyes searching her. He held a breath and then released it, cheeks puffing out. His shoulders slumped.

"Shit. You're right 'Mione. When Malfoy went all 'control your in-laws' on me I just went with it."

"Are you Ginny's keeper, Harry?"

"What? No—"

"Then stop acting like Draco is mine."

Harry recoiled at that, a physical response to the well-aimed arrow in her words. Somewhere, Theodore Nott was taking a shot in solidarity.

"Fuck," Harry breathed. "I'm a complete arse aren't I?"

Hermione smiled and took his arm, not quite denying it. “Let’s just get Operation In-Laws going so we can relax,” she said, leading Harry towards the house once more.

—

“I think that went better than expected,” Hermione mused as she and Harry approached the gardens behind the house.

“Are you serious? Molly asked why you weren’t wearing your ring and I had to *Silencio* Charlie to stop his sniggering.”

“It was a nice bit of nonverbal casting,” Hermione offered. “Very impressive.”

“Hermione, she had no right to ask about—that—" Harry started.

“Do you see any cracks? Any shatters?” Hermione asked him. “I feel as if I’m holding up quite well. A little untethered at times, but well.”

Harry gave her a rather pained sort of look.

“It’s just,” he began with a level of caution that snapped a tense line across Hermione’s shoulders. “Some of us who are much closer to you may have been waiting for the right time, not that there really is one, to—bring it up. Because we care, of course. Not out of morbid curiosity—and Ginny was curious, too.” His words ran rushed by the end of it.

Some of her tension eased.

“Harry Potter,” Hermione said. “Are you put out that Molly Weasley had the nerve to ask me before you did?”

“I—yes,” he deflated. “Yes, I am.”

Hermione had started twisting at the fourth finger on her left hand, massaging the space between joints where a ring might sit, where one once did. She let her hands drop as soon as she noticed the mostly subconscious action.

“It didn’t even occur to me for a couple of months,” Hermione admitted as they wound their way through the tangle of growth that

was the herb garden. “And once I realized I hadn’t mentioned it, well—it’s been too long now, hasn’t it? I can’t very well ask to see it now without the reminder of all the time I *didn’t* ask about it.”

“You haven’t asked about it at all? It’s not that you just aren’t wearing it—"

“Correct. I’ve made things rather awkward for myself.”

“Oof,” was the only response Harry had.

“Eloquent, Harry, thank you for the support.” Hermione shoved him lightly with her shoulder as they approached the miniature version of a Quidditch pitch, Ginny and Draco in view, but the final Weasley sibling suspiciously unaccounted for.

Hermione stopped walking, her pulse jumped at the sight in front of her.

“Harry?” she asked. “What am I looking at?”

Ginny sat on a blanket near the center of the kid’s Quidditch field, reading to a child Hermione didn’t recognize. That was the normal part, almost picturesque. A light breeze caught Ginny’s hair and blew a few unfastened pieces across her face. She smiled brightly at the child in front of her, emoting some fantastical element from the picture book in her hands.

But beyond her, Draco Malfoy sat in the grass, legs out in front of him, arms back, holding himself up as James Potter crawled all over him, clutching a tiny toy broom and giggling. Draco offered the boy an enormous grin, said something, and then suddenly leaned forward, picking the toddler up around the middle and placing him on the broomstick. Another tiny human hovered on a toy broom nearby, inching her way towards where James now lingered a foot off the ground. Hermione caught sight of Albus crawling towards Draco. With almost preternatural ease, Draco scooped Albus into his arms and pivoted into a crouch, one hand on the broom holding James up, giving it a tiny push of momentum.

Hermione felt something in her chest swell, a warmth not unlike the feeling of her own magic pulsing through her veins.

“Oh yeah,” Harry said. “Albus is getting pretty close to walking. Did you see that just now?”

“No, Harry, not that. *That,”* she repeated, gesturing dumbly at the scene in front of her.

“What?” Harry asked, clearly not witnessing the same version of unreality that she was in that moment. “Oh. *Oh.* You haven’t seen him with kids yet, have you?”

And something Draco had told her in their living room, voice numb from occlusion, found its way to the forefront of Hermione’s brain: *I like children.* It had been such an innocuous statement at the time, but now, with context, it shifted.

Harry grabbed her hand and pulled her closer to the scene before them, a new sense of glee overcoming him. “This is his single redeeming quality,” Harry said sagely. “One of the only reasons we put up with him, honestly.” It was said seriously, but Hermione saw the secret smile pulling across his face.

Ginny looked up at them as they approached. “Oh good, you’ve survived.”

“Barely,” Harry joked, still tugging Hermione closer.

“Malfoy is trying to corrupt your youngest son,” Ginny said with a look towards Draco. She spoke with far less concern than Hermione might have imagined a sentence like that required.

And sure enough, when Hermione looked again towards Draco he was standing at full height, James now flying slow circles around his legs. He held Albus in his arms, smiling at the child while holding a distinctly Slytherin-colored plush snake.

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake,” Harry breathed.

Hermione followed as Harry approached Draco and the kids, still not fully decided on what strange dynamic she’d just dropped in on. Handling the Weasley’s had been nothing, *this* was the untethering bit. The whirlpool spun faster.

“Oi, Malfoy. Quit trying to make my kid a Slytherin.”

Draco looked up, utterly unfazed.

“I’m merely supporting Albus’s future. Someone must,” he replied.

“He’s not a Slytherin,” Harry repeated.

Draco considered Harry's words for a moment before countering. "A weak argument, allow me to pose a rebuttal in three parts." He settled into an arrogant stance, a smirk spreading.

Harry didn't so much roll his eyes as he rolled his entire body, releasing a sigh of exasperation.

"First," Draco began. "You, yourself were almost sorted into Slytherin, were you not?"

"Malfoy, I told you that under duress," Harry gaped.

"Alcohol is not duress. You're a chatty drunk; that's not my fault. Second, the child is named after a remarkably famous Slytherin who also happened to be head of house for nearly two decades."

"Oh, come off it—"

"And third, his initials are A-S-P, literally an ancient word for snake."

What Hermione would have given at that moment for a photograph of the smug expression planted firmly on Draco's face and, conversely, the equal look of horror on Harry's.

Harry had no chance to respond to what was, honestly, an impressive series of points, because James's little hands started grappling at the leg of Draco's trousers. With a practiced smirk, and not breaking eye contact with Harry, Draco pulled a sweet from his pocket and offered it to the boy on the broom near his knees. Harry huffed another sigh.

"Now James," Draco said, kneeling down. "Be honest with me, are your mum and dad giving you enough candies? If they aren't, you're more than welcome to come and stay with me and your godmother until we figure out this horrendous oversight on your parents' behalf."

James only giggled, popping the tiny soft candy in his mouth and continuing his circles around Draco.

"Wait," Hermione started, finally finding words of her own. "Was that one of your secret stash of candies that I'm not allowed to have?"

"Yes."

"And you're sharing them with him and not me?"

"Well, he's a child," Draco said as if that were the answer to everything.

“Well, I’m your wife.” It slipped out before she could diagnose the potential virility of her words. Had she even said it before? Certainly not to him.

Something darkened almost instantly behind Draco’s eyes as his entire focus narrowed to her. Her words had hijacked something primal in his stare.

“Perhaps if you asked nicely,” he prompted, breath carrying the words low and perilous.

“Gross, Merlin, not in front of my kids,” Harry grunted with disgust. He stepped forward and liberated Albus from Draco’s arms. “Let’s go have cake or something while I—try to forget witnessing that.”

—

“I saw you looking, by the way,” Ginny said in a sing-song sort of way from beside Hermione as they sat together after cake and presents and an all-around lovely time. They watched Harry, Draco, and George as they attempted to organize a small flock of children into something resembling a Quidditch team. Their efforts were rewarded almost exclusively in jabs to the shins by poorly controlled toy brooms.

Lavender and Fleur sat on another blanket nearby, carrying their own conversation as Fleur ran her fingers through Victoire’s long strawberry blonde locks.

“Saw me looking at what?” Hermione asked, enjoying the warm cast of afternoon sun on her face. She’d almost managed to desensitize herself to the occasional crack of fireworks. It had been a genuinely relaxing afternoon thus far.

“Him, the ferret, with the kids. I almost feel like I ought to have warned you.”

“What? Warn me that Draco knows how to interact with children? It’s surprising, sure, but—"

“No, more about the warm, melty feelings you get when you see him with kids,” Ginny said with a wince as James rolled off his broom and onto the grass in the distance.

Denial felt exhausting in that moment.

Instead, Hermione made a quiet humming noise of acknowledgment. “You know about that, then?”

“You’ve mentioned it once or twice. Kind of makes you want to jump his bones, doesn’t it?”

“Ginny!” Hermione protested, feeling her face heat with embarrassment. She struggled to conjure a denial. So she deflected. “You sure you’re not just thinking of you and Harry?”

Ginny made a thoughtful noise. “Of course I am. We’re serious about trying for a third, after all. Might even make a schedule. Circle dates on the calendar and everything, just to up our odds.”

Ginny had said it so casually, so without care or caution, but her words slammed into Hermione with an unexpected force that sent her spinning. The whirlpool lost its grip on her, sending her hurtling towards a still, open expanse of ocean. She sank, a memory of her first night back in her flat rising up to meet her on the descent. Sex scheduled in her planner, intent, children. *I like children.*

“Oh, of course, you wouldn’t remember, I’m sorry,” Ginny said, mistaking the source of Hermione’s shock. “We decided we want three kids, gluttons for punishment and all that.” She lowered her voice to a whisper and leaned closer to Hermione. “And I’d *really* like a girl, but we’ll see.”

“Gin!” George called from the field, “it’s fine if I take James up on my broom, right? Just ten or fifteen feet. Harry’s already said no but I know you’re really the one in charge.”

Ginny was already on her feet, headed towards her brother, shaking her head and lobbing child-friendly threats.

A shadow blocked the sun in front of Hermione. Malfoy stood before her, looking windswept and at ease and like he’d omitted an enormous piece of information about their life for the last three and a half months.

“Hi,” he said, a touch out of breath. He sat in the space Ginny had just vacated and leaned back on his elbows. “We gave it a good shot, but the under-four crowd over there is struggling with the International Confederation of Quidditch’s rules and regulations.”

Hermione didn't respond. She didn't have anything to say, nor did she know what she could or should say. Hermione had only just managed to get a bit of a grip on her new life. She'd started to trust that the people around her, who were meant to care for her, would finally stop holding so much back. But the parameters she'd learned to operate within had just shifted around her, altered by a crucial bit of information. She didn't know how to function in yet another new version of her life.

Malfoy laid back completely, resting his head against the ground and looking as relaxed as she'd ever seen him. He even had his eyes closed, a line of pale lashes curved above the apples of his cheeks. "Much as I loathe it here most of the time," he began, eyes still closed, "this place has its merits. We had our first date here, you know."

He opened his eyes again and caught her staring. Hermione pulled her knees to her chest, tenting the skirt of her dress around her legs and holding them tight with her arms. Torn between begging him to tell her more and demanding he give her several country's worth of space to process what she'd just realized, she said nothing.

She barely recognized the smile on his face: open and honest and everything his omission wasn't.

"You brought me as your plus one to the Potter wedding," he told her, mischief heavy in his words. "I doubt there's a seer in the entire wizarding world who could have predicted that Harry Potter's wedding would be one of the best nights of my life. I got to rankle Weasley feathers and dance with you for hours. It was perfect."

He let his head fall back against the ground again. "I kissed you in the gardens," he said quietly, on the edge of wistfulness. "It wasn't our first kiss—but it was—" He didn't finish his thought and Hermione was grateful for it. His words made her ache.

He sat up again, the spell of his reverie broken. His brows furrowed when he looked at her.

"Are you alright?"

No.

"Yes."

He reached out, hand pausing as it hovered over her left shoulder, considering the consequences of touch. She shifted away. His fingers

curled inward and the hand fell away.

“You seem upset,” he said.

She shrugged.

“There’s been a lot of—stimulation today. I think I’d like to leave.”

He watched her a moment longer, then nodded.

“Then we’ll leave.” He stood, something crisp and short in the movement. “I’ll tell Potter.”

—

Hermione walked straight to the bedroom when she apparated back to the flat. Past the crowded living room. Past the single bathroom. Past the unusable guest room. Directly to the bedroom door and then to the foot of the bed where she’d left the planner that was embossed in her initials. She stared at it, taunting her from atop the burgundy blankets. She felt hot, nervous and frustrated, and struggling to make sense of how she felt and how she was meant to feel. Was there a difference? Should there be? She shrugged off her denim jacket and dropped it beside the planner.

She reached for it, leather uncharacteristically cold to the touch. She flipped it open, all the way back to January, to her missing time, to her stay at St. Mungo’s, and to the week after. Still there, forever inked in red pen, three days of the week scheduled for sex. She could have kicked herself for not recognizing it for what it was the first time she’d seen it, but after everything else she’d been through that day, it only registered as another drop in the proverbial bucket.

She heard the *pop* that told her Malfoy had returned to the flat as well. She hadn’t waited for him when she left. The only thing she could focus on was the planner she’d left on the bed.

She walked back out into the hallway and towards the kitchen table where she found him standing, caution in his posture. He stiffened, a careful expression on his face as he watched her approach. She saw his gaze flicker down to the book in her hand, a single finger holding the space between the pages she needed him to explain.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, an uncharacteristic vulnerability fraying him out at the edges.

She set the book down, open to the pages for that week in January, and slid it across the table towards him.

She watched the recognition latch onto his vertebrae, ratcheting him straighter.

“Is this what I think it is?” Hermione asked, finding her voice low, quiet.

Coldness started to settle on his face and Hermione snapped.

“Don’t occlude.”

“How else am I supposed to have this conversation?” he snapped with equal measure.

“Like anyone else would.” She crossed her arms in front of her.

His posture sank by a measure only distinguishable on the likes of Draco Malfoy.

“It’s exactly what you think it is,” he said. “What do you want me to say?”

“I want you to tell me why you never mentioned it. It’s kind of—*huge.”*

He released an enormous breath and steadied himself, one hand gripping the back of the kitchen chair in front of him. With his other hand, he reached down and picked up the planner, staring intently at the pages. Rather than slip into something cold and controlled under the weight of Occlumency, Hermione could see his fingers flexing against the chair, something hot and angry working its way to the surface.

“What would you have had me say? You could barely even speak to me,” he said with a bite, teeth bared. A flash of something dangerous passed between them, tension pulled tighter, the whirlpool sucking her in again. Without warning he launched the planner across the small flat, sending it crashing against the stacks of books in the living room. She heard her towers of literature toppling, but she couldn’t tear her focus from the unraveling man across from her.

“What the fuck was I supposed to say?” he repeated, something ragged and unhinged had taken over, composure abandoned. A flush of red crept of his neck and cheeks. “How was I supposed to tell my wife, who couldn’t even stand the look of me, that we wanted to have a family? How would you propose I go about that, Hermione?” He used her name like a weapon, every syllable designed to wound.

“Something would have been better than nothing—"

“And risk the meager scraps you afforded me?” He raked a hand through his hair, already blown wild by the wind from their afternoon spent outdoors, the action only unsettled it further, adding the frenzy of his appearance.

“It’s not for you to decide what information about my own life I am and am not capable of knowing,” she nearly shouted, indignant at his outrage.

Malfoy laughed, something callous.

“So if I’d told you from the beginning we were trying to get pregnant would you have stayed here with me? When you still thought you belonged with that great idiot Ronald Weasley? And how was I to bring it up, later? After we’d finally made progress but too much time had passed? It would have turned into this.” He motioned between them, at the space practically crackling with furious magic. “But it did turn into this anyway,” he admitted, hanging his head, a hand pressing against his temple. His voice was barely a whisper when he spoke again.

“How long until you left? Until you decide to leave? Or until you tell *me* to leave?” Something shattered behind his eyes. A new floodgate spilled open. His other hand slammed down to the back of the chair, both now gripping the wood until his knuckles turned white.

Hermione didn’t know how to respond to that. She didn’t even know if he was wrong or not. Would she have stayed? She didn’t know. But did she deserve the option? Yes. Unequivocally, yes. And she meant to tell him that, she did. But he was breathing heavily, still holding onto the back of the kitchen chair for what looked like his dear life, and when he lifted his head his eyes were bloodshot.

“You would have left,” he said quietly.

“You don’t know that. I don’t even know that.”

“The risk was enough.” His gaze searched her, a sneer and something else pinning her under his evaluation. “I was being selfish. It was the one concession I made for myself, everything else I did for you.” His lip curled, disgust evident.

“And was that difficult for you, Malfoy? Doing something for someone other than yourself?”

“Back to Malfoy and you’re being intentionally nasty, too? Good to see there’s still some fight in you,” he shot back.

“Oh piss off,” she snapped.

He staggered, a single step, his grip on the chair still holding firm.

“Is that it, then? Are you telling me to leave?”

“That’s not what I meant,” she said, some of her fight draining. It was like beating a wounded creature, like he expected her to hurt him.

“Because I would,” he said, looking past her, avoiding. “If you really wanted me to, needed me to, I would. Because it’s not difficult, doing anything for you.”

“Malfoy." His eyes squeezed shut when she said his name, that name. “Draco,” she tried again, softer.

His eyes snapped back open and before Hermione could wrangle whatever words she’d intended to say next, he was in front of her, even closer than they’d been that morning.

In their proximity, she could count the tiny smile lines at the corners of his eyes. She could make out the tinge of pinkness on his skin from their day spent outside. She could see the closely kept secret that was his fear, held just out of reach behind the furrow of his brow and the angle of his shoulders. His smell, spice and citrus, still so distinct even at the end of a long day, blanketed her.

He lifted a hand, not quite touching the side of her face, the only hint of contact coming from the single curl he wrapped around his finger.

He stared at her like a man on the verge of starvation, ravenous for her flesh and fighting every instinct to reach for it. Something unspooled in Hermione’s chest, a heat winding its way outward, seeking purchase.

“Just be gentle with me, Granger,” he breathed, reeling her in with her own name, wielded like a different kind of weapon. “You’ve got me on the gallows here.”

He let the curl fall from his fingers. “But I’ll be damned if you’re not the most beautiful executioner I’ve ever seen.”

She wasn’t sure if he pushed or she pulled.

Or if the whirlpool sucked them in together.

But the brush of his lips against hers, so brief and barely realized, felt like a lightning strike to her soul. She had to take a step back, her pulse fluttering beneath her skin, the very marrow of her bones burning her from the inside out.

Draco didn’t look at her, he didn’t even look like he was breathing: as if he, too, could barely believe what he, or she, or they had done. She watched him swallow, wrangling his self-control: a starving man temporarily sated.

He walked to the living room and retrieved her planner. He stood at a distance when he returned it to her, an offering in more ways than one.

“I’ll give you some space tonight. I think we both might need it.”

Hermione nodded. Several country's worth of space, she’d considered before.

“I’ll be at Theodore Nott’s,” he said. The first time he’d ever told her where he went, when he went.

She nodded again, not trusting her voice to let him go, despite knowing they needed it.

When he’d gone, Hermione considered the difference between drowning and dry land, not knowing where the whirlpool had just dropped her.

Chapter End Notes

i love and appreciate kudos and comments if you feel so inclined to let me know what you think!! also, come hang out with me on tumblr, its a good time!

art inspired by this chapter:

Gallows by nitephoenix

Chapter 5: Draco Malfoy

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"...for there are two distinct sorts of ideas, those that proceed from the head and those that emanate from the heart."

— Alexandre Dumas, The Count of Monte Cristo

—

May

Hermione picked at her cuticles, a habit she developed during the unending stress of war and the worst extended camping trip of her life. In the missing six years of her memory, it seemed that she'd managed to overcome the impulse, only to have it creep back up on her under the too-bright lights of a St. Mungo's examination room while she sat across from Healer Lucas and her apprentice, Jenkins

Every month they had this meeting.

Every month they told her the same thing.

"There appears to be no change." Jenkins said it this month. Last month Healer Lucas had the honors. Regardless of the delivery, these wellness check-ins had started to stale, repetitious in their lack of progress. Nearly five months in the sun, the words had started to rot.

She'd told Draco not to bother taking time off work this month to sit in the waiting room while they told her the same thing they told her the month before. She didn't need to make a special trip to the hospital to know that nothing had changed inside her head.

Apart from just about every feeling she'd ever felt towards Draco Malfoy, that is.

In the three weeks since the argument in their tiny kitchen, since something upended Hermione's understanding of their dynamic in the space of an almost nonexistent kiss, Draco did something entirely unexpected. He dug his heels in. He returned from Theo's the next day

with a list of stories about their life together and the promise to tell her every last one of them, no matter how long it took.

And even more important than all of that, he came with an apology.

“I can’t forget the last six years,” he’d said, clutching the list of memories in his fist. “But you can’t remember them, either.”

Hermione had only just settled onto the velvet sofa with Crookshanks and a cup of tea when he’d returned, breathless and determined to bare his soul.

“And I’m sorry,” he continued. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I think—I’d hoped, that if you just *remembered*—I wouldn’t have to have the hard conversations, relive the old arguments. I’d like to amend my excuse-making last night to include that I am also a coward. I was being selfish and a coward.”

He’d cringed then, a grimace spreading.

“But I’ve kept the good things from you too, in hoping you’d just remember, and that’s not fair. I know an apology isn’t always enough, so I’d like to show you.” He held up the crumpled parchment in his hand.

And in the twenty-two days since that revolution of an apology and the understanding they agreed upon in its aftermath, Hermione had learned a new story about their life together every morning over breakfast. And then he’d leave for work to go brew potions for hours on end. And she’d go to work too, proofreading report after report while the Ministry sat on their hands trying to figure out what to do with an employee mentally missing six years of work history. And in their evenings, quiet and tired and strangely hopeful, they would simply sit and talk like a normal pair. It was a conscious choice of relearning her life and trusting him to teach her.

And it was slowly breaking down every barrier to accepting that Draco might actually be a decent, likable human being.

“I’ve come to consider a new theory,” Jenkins said, breaking the tedium that was the same sorry news each month they met. “The Ministry sent us the finalized report on the artifact you came in contact with—"

“I know, I proofread it,” Hermione said, unamused.

“The report is very clear that the object in question was designed to deliver physical trauma, equivalent to an enormous concussive blow to the head, which is consistent with the state of your injuries. Physical, not magical. It is—" Jenkins broke off, clearing his throat. He tried continuing, tripping towards the words he wanted.

Healer Lucas cut in. “What Jenkins is trying to explain is that, barring a magical explanation, it is possible that the physical trauma of your accident has caused irreparable damage to the parts of your brain responsible for the memory storage of the last six years.”

Hermione’s comprehension caught on the word *irreparable,* feeling it scrape at the inside of her skull, excising what bits of hope she clung to. Her world spun, teetering on the painful finality of those words.

Jenkins cleared his throat again, reclaiming the delivery of this new iteration in what was meant to be a boring and repetitious medical update.

“The specificity of your missing time, however, is what continues to perplex us,” he said. “From our tests and your own recollections, the only missing time you have is from a continuous sequence stretching back from the moment of injury.”

Hermione’s throat had run dry: a veritable drought at the base of her tongue, sand dunes shifting in her throat, a desert in her lungs. *Irreparable.*

“Mrs. Granger-Malfoy?” Healer Lucas asked.

Irreparable.

“Yes?”

“Are you alright?” she asked, casting a quick spell to track her vitals. “Your heart rate is elevated. We’re not saying there is no hope, Mrs. Granger-Malfoy. Jenkins has an alternate theory he’d like to propose.”

“Of course,” Hermione said. Her cuticles paid the price as she tried to hold herself together. She knew whatever they were going to say next would be nothing but empty platitudes, ornamental bookends at the border of bad news.

Jenkins pulled his chair closer to the examination table where she sat, placing himself in a position where he had to look up at her when he spoke, which paired nicely to her focus on the laminate floors.

“In general, with non magical head trauma like this we would expect the extent of missing time—if there even is missing time, it’s quite uncommon—to be more generalized than what you’ve experienced. Your memory loss is very clean, in a sense.”

Hermione knew this, to some degree. She’d done the research. Months and months of research and it all told her how unlikely it was that she should experience her memory loss in the way she was. She’d assumed the odds simply weren’t in her favor, and not from lack of imagination on her behalf. But merely by way of experience. If growing up alongside Harry Potter had taught her anything, it was that the extent of the odds didn’t mean much of anything when the bad things still happened to you anyway.

She lifted her gaze to look at Jenkins. He had kind hazel eyes and sandy brown hair that could have done with a trim. It was the kind of look that made him easily trustworthy. And he was tearing her hope to shreds.

“What are you saying?” she asked him.

“It almost looks possible that there is a secondary, unknown magical component to your injury that has localized your trauma in this way. Or perhaps, it’s the primary source of injury and the concussion from the artifact was poor timing, or a trigger. What I’m saying is that it’s possible there’s something we don’t know.”

Hermione certainly had experience with the impact of things she didn’t know.

“And what does that change?” she asked, trying to remember to advocate for herself and not sink into the spiral of grief swirling in her brain. She’d been wrong to ask Draco to stay behind; she needed an anchor.

“Nothing, for now,” Healer Lucas said. “Jenkins is going to look into some alternative theories. We’ll continue to monitor your progress, and most importantly, we’re not giving up.”

Hermione nodded, frighteningly on the verge of tears. The nearly instant vacuum she experienced in the lack of hope, *irreparable* shooting between blank spaces in her brain, had surprised her with its intensity.

Feeling numb, Hermione thanked her healers as she usually did and exited to the main lobby of St. Mungo’s, only to find herself face to

face with Theodore Nott. Relief brought a smile, a sense of familiarity. Sensation returned to her limbs.

“Another kidnapping?” she asked. Then she considered. “How did you know I was here?”

“Draco might have mentioned that you told him not to come. He’s putting on a fine show of pretending he’s not worried you’re upset with him—"

“He just sits in the waiting area while the healers tell me the same thing they tell me every month,” she said, hating how wrong she’d been.

Theo’s head moved almost imperceptibly towards her, observing. “But it wasn’t the same thing this time.” He didn’t pose it as a question.

“How could you—"

“You’re looking a little pale.” He looped an arm through hers, a favorite way to travel with Theo, apparently. “Let’s get some lunch, my treat.”

“I’m not sure I’m feeling up to that, honestly,” Hermione admitted, still shuffling through a lingering sense of fear and loss.

Theo opened the doors to the hospital and led them out to the street. “Do you want to talk about it?”

She glanced up at him. He looked genuinely concerned beneath all the confidence and swagger he presented. “I don’t think so,” she said, then amended, “I’m not sure, honestly.” She sighed. How could she possibly explain this cold vacancy inside her chest?

He broke his hold on her arm and swung around so that he faced her. He placed his hands on her shoulders, offering a comforting squeeze before he spoke.

“I have the perfect solution,” he announced. “Nott Manor.”

She blinked as he looked at her like his proclamation carried obvious implications. She waited for a beat before humoring him.

“I assume you mean to say that Nott Manor has food available for eating?”

“Such a know it all,” he reprimanded with a smile as he released her

shoulders and offered his arm again. “Side-along?”

She rolled her eyes, a near-constant expression when in his presence. But she couldn’t deny, she was glad not to be alone.

“Alright, fine.”

—

“Theo,” Hermione began, eyes wide as she spun in a slow circle, taking in the room they’d rematerialized in. “I realize we’ve probably had this conversation before and you’re going to think my repeating it adorable, which I’ll let you know right now I’ll find patronizing, *but*—I know you said you’re wealthy..." she couldn’t even finish the sentence.

Theo snorted a laugh, as undignified as she’d seen him. “With that setup, there’s no way for me to respond without getting in trouble.”

“This is as ridiculous as Malfoy Manor. I mean, I know you called it a manor, but—I didn’t exactly expect this.”

“Malfoy Manor is bigger, both in the main house and the grounds. Draco used to spend a great deal of time reminding me of that fact,” Theo smirked. “Though the Nott gardens are much nicer in my opinion. The addition of those albino turkeys on the Malfoy estate really ruins the ambiance.”

“You mean the peacocks?”

“Yes, the fowl, appropriately so-called.”

Hermione hummed in acknowledgement, gaze dancing across a beautiful tapestry nearly the size of her kitchen.

“I rather like peacocks,” she said. “They’re beautiful creatures.”

“You’ve clearly never had to run from one as a seven year old while a little blond git laughs at you.” Theo shivered.

“Draco is the little blond git in this story?”

“Isn’t he always? This way, we have a small sitting room adjacent to the kitchens in this wing.”

“Of course you do,” Hermione said, finding herself grinning. It was nice, even after the small gauntlet her emotions had run at the hospital, that Theo could still manage to wring a smile from her.

Theo sniffed the air as they turned into the small sitting room which was, in fact, nearly the size of Hermione’s entire flat.

“What is that—" Theo began before heaving a great sigh of annoyance. “Blaise. I know I’ve told you before that the smoke really sinks into the upholstery. If you have no concern for my wishes at least have concern for the antique jacquards.”

Blaise Zabini, who Hermione knew only by name and couldn’t recall exchanging a single word with in all their years together at Hogwarts, sat beside a window on the far side of the sitting room. He had his feet propped up on what was probably an excruciatingly expensive table, his head back and staring at the paneled ceiling, and a cigarette held casually in his hand. He took another drag from his cigarette and turned his head slowly towards where Theo stood, scandalized. Blaise’s only reaction to seeing Hermione was a slight lift of his brow.

He released his breath, smoke propelled in front of him before it twisted and dissipated. With a casual disinterest, he returned his gaze to the ceiling.

“So,” Blaise started. “Does she remember or do you have a death wish?”

“I prefer to think of it as a healthy fascination with the macabre,” Theo replied. “Why are you here, exactly?”

“I won’t be long. Just working.”

Blaise twisted his head towards the window beside him. In the distance, Hermione spotted a large greenhouse and the edges of what looked like an enormous rose garden.

“This’ll be good,” Blaise said, looking at Theo and Hermione with no indication on his face that he actually believed his own words.

A door opened and then quickly closed in the adjacent room. Footsteps indicated movement towards the sitting room.

“Draco,” Blaise called. “Theo’s back.”

“Oh good,” Draco’s voice carried from the next room, growing closer.

“I’ve grabbed some Hellebore from the greenhouse. Do have any idea how much they’re charging for them in Diagon—"

Hermione felt the size of the sitting room shrink by half the moment Draco came into view and stopped dead in his tracks. For a man nearly ghost pale in his complexion, somehow even more color drained from Draco’s face. His gaze shifted from Theo to Hermione, briefly to Blaise, and then back to Theo.

A low noise slipped from the back of Draco’s throat, carried on the breath of a strangled sigh.

Theo opened his mouth to speak, only to be preemptively silenced by the hand Draco lifted. A quiet sort of authority, tinted with fury, emanated from him. He pointed to an armchair opposite Blaise.

“Theo. *Fuck.* Just—sit,” Draco ordered. His voice carried low, measured in its enunciation. Hermione braced herself for what could only be his tremendous anger building. She counted, waiting for it to unfurl. She nearly jumped when the satchel Draco had slung over his shoulder slipped to the ground with a small thud.

“I was going to tell you, I promise,” Draco said, and Hermione realized he spoke to her. His outrage towards Theo evidently sidelined.

“I—what?”

“It’s on the list, they’re on the list,” he said, taking a small step forward. “There’s just so much to tell you—six years, after all. I’ve been trying to go in order and take it slow so it makes sense. It’s different with my friends, you didn’t know them before. I just—"

“You’re not mad?” Hermione interrupted.

“I’m furious,” he said with a nod of his head in Theo’s direction. “With him.” Draco paused, searching her with a cautious look. “Are you not mad?”

“I—" Hermione started. “No, I don’t think so. Should I be?”

“I assumed you would be?” He answered like he was asking it as a question. He took another small step towards her: a push “Just another thing about your life I haven’t told you yet.” He sounded exhausted with himself even as he said it.

Hermione found herself taking her own tiny step: a pull. “I’m trying to be more understanding,” she admitted. “You’re right, six years is a lot to learn.”

“And I’m trying, I promise I am. I’m trying to find the right way to tell you all of it.”

The distance between them had shrunk by half again. The breath Hermione released felt like a weight lifted from her conscience. She cleared her throat.

“I suppose you should know,” she started. “I actually met Theo—well, met him again, in March.”

Hermione ignored the quiet, “et tu brute?” whispered by Theo in the background. Though admittedly, she found the muggle reference impressive and she wondered, on the wave of a careening unrelated thought, if she’d taught it to him.

“March,” Draco repeated, mental math evident on his face.

His gaze shifted to Theo for the first time since he’d ordered his friend to sit.

Theo’s hands went up in defense after deliberately placing his wand on a nearby table.

“I know what you’re thinking, Draco,” Theo rushed. Draco’s lips had pulled together, nostrils flaring with each controlled inhale. “You’re thinking, ‘wow, Theo, my best friend. I am so shocked that you have less respect for my wishes than Pansy does,’ which, to be fair, was a surprise to me too—*but,* Hermione is also my friend, and you were having a really terrible time and I just wanted to help and I’d appreciate it if, when you hex me, you aim for a body part I won’t miss too terribly.”

Draco had a hand at his temple, massaging in a slow circle, leaving a slightly pink, irritated patch of skin in its wake.

“Are you finished?” Draco asked.

“If I keep talking do my chances at survival increase?”

“I’m not going to hex you, Theo.”

“Funny, Hermione said the same thing to me recently.”

Draco glanced at Hermione and she gave a small shrug, almost disturbingly amused more than anything at Theo's antics, and growing steadily confident that bodily harm was not imminently on the horizon.

"I trust you're here on your own volition?" Draco asked her, shifting his weight with what looked like barely contained irritation. In a weird way, it made Hermione smile; the man was trying.

"We were going to have lunch," she said.

Draco nodded, shooting another annoyed look at Theo.

"I have to go back to work," Draco said slowly, regret laced in every word.

From the corner of her eye, Hermione saw the butt end of a cigarette fly in an arch before landing on the ground. Blaise released a disinterested sigh.

"Not on the gods damned carpets, Blaise," Theo grumbled. "These are sixteenth century, you new-money heathen." He lunged to grab the discarded cigarette filter and threw it back at Blaise before returning to his seat.

"Come on, Draco. That was exceedingly underwhelming," Blaise said, rising and walking towards Draco with a languid sort of movement that Hermione found eerily reminiscent of a dance. "It's a good thing Pansy's in France for another three weeks because as soon as she finds out you were making empty threats..." Blaise lobbed a pointed look at Hermione. He let the rest of his sentence, and all the unspoken implications with it, hang.

Draco shook his head and walked back to grab his satchel from the ground, heaving small sighs of frustration as if he couldn't figure out the best way to express how wildly annoyed he was over the entire situation in that sitting room.

Hermione crossed the space between them on instinct, suddenly overcome by the simplicity of their conversation, by the understanding in it. In only a matter of minutes, witnessed by Blaise Zabini and Theodore Nott of all people, she felt something cosmically huge shift, an effort by the both of them to understand. To avoid the hurting they were feeling. And the hurting they were causing. So easily, there could have been shouting, there could have been pain. But there wasn't.

And so she couldn't help but approach him, despite the look of surprise on Draco's face as she stopped, barely a foot between them, and gave him a small smile. Just barely visible behind his shoulder, she saw Blaise's head tilt.

"Thank you," she whispered, words meant only for Draco.

He blinked, confusion manifested as furrowed brows.

"You're welcome," he said, tone lilting like a question, and equally as quiet.

"I'll see you tonight."

Something morphed on his face. A familiar smirk grew, slipping closer to a genuine smile, but still painted with a confident brush.

"Tonight," he agreed, lighter, and apparated away. Blaise followed shortly behind.

A moment later, Theo spoke from his spot on the chair Draco had assigned to him.

"Well. I, for one, found that surprisingly arousing."

Hermione nearly choked on her laughter, utterly amazed at the turn her day had taken.

—

"I think we should go on a date," Hermione announced as she apparated into the flat that evening.

She'd been thinking about it all afternoon, floating her way through lunch with Theo, through a little afternoon trawling in Diagon Alley, and through the thirty additional minutes she spent pacing the street outside their flat before she finally decided to apparate in.

Irreparable had wormed its way into her consciousness. The word had snuck its way back in, taking residence inside the vacancies in her heart and mind where she'd once stored her hope, in lieu of her memories, waiting.

She didn't want to wait anymore. She wasn't even sure there was a point in waiting anymore.

Draco sat ramrod straight on the green tufted sofa at her proclamation, reading glasses slipping from his face.

"Oh," Hermione said, distracted. "Are you reading The Count of Monte Cristo?"

Draco cycled through a number of different postures as Hermione approached the sofa and sat next to him.

"I am. But perhaps we should start with the first thing you—"

"Is that my copy? I saw it on your bedside table—"

"It is. But again, I'd like to circle back to—"

"It's my favorite, though you probably know that—"

"I do. Now about this suggestion of a—"

"What are your favorite parts? I'm not surprised you'd like it, too. It's very—"

Draco shut the book with the small thud of thick pages and leather binding coming together, halting her stream of questions. He held the book out between them in what looked suspiciously like a defense of his person.

"I don't actually—I don't like this book," he said. Hermione's mouth dropped open.

"What?"

"I try a few times a year. Thought I might try again today. But it is just *so* boring. Best we get this out of the way now, I think." He didn't look even remotely remorseful.

"But it's my favorite book," Hermione protested. "And you don't even like it?"

"I'd go so far as to say I loathe it." He wore an almost-smirk, twitching at the edges of his mouth.

Hermione snatched the tome from where he held it between them, clutching it against her chest, cherished and rightfully respected. A

flash of white teeth and a dimple distracted her from her indignation. Draco was laughing, almost silently, but his mouth stretched wide, a genuine smile shooting a pang of familiarity, of something that felt like home, straight through her chest.

“I’ll try again. I always do,” he said, tiny huffs of laughter still washing over him. And even though he was still laughing at her, in a way, it didn’t have the same factor of humiliation that his laughter had in their youth. He laughed at her with kindness, if that were such a thing. She hadn’t known he was capable of that.

He cleared his throat, serious again. “About this date you’ve suggested?”

“Well, I can’t go on a date with you *now,* not with such a glaring personality flaw.”

He reached out and gently pulled the book from her grasp, setting it down on the table beside them.

“Of all my flaws, our differing opinions on literature are hardly the barrier to entry here.” He paused, a bleak look passing through him. He recovered, features settling into something hopeful. “Were you serious? Would you like to go out?”

She gathered her thoughts again, back on track to eliminate the word *irreparable* from her mind by trying something different.

“I would,” she said, knowing such permission might very well change everything. The next moment, Draco looked incapable of concealing his smile. “But,” she continued. His face fell by a fraction. “I’d like to go somewhere new, someone we’ve never been together before. I’d just—" she tried to find the right way to explain her apprehension, to explain all the various avenues she’d considered before working up the courage to ask. “I’d like not to be at a disadvantage. I feel like I’m always a step, a memory, behind, and it would be nice to go somewhere neutral.”

“Muggle or magical? Or do you not care?”

Hermione had expected some kind of pushback, a favorite place he might want to take her, a memory he might want to relive. That he completely skipped over the part where she expected him to disagree with her was a surprise she hadn’t anticipated.

“Oh—I don’t, I suppose—" she fumbled. “I didn’t think quite that far

ahead."

He seemed to consider her for a moment, a fist under his chin as he watched her, deep in thought.

"That's fine," he said finally. "I'll take care of everything. Tomorrow evening?"

"Tomorrow is a Tuesday."

"Do you expect me to have the willpower to wait for the weekend?"

It was the strangest sort of self-deprecation draped in a compliment Hermione could imagine. She felt herself blush. Having Draco Malfoy grow on her had twisted into a complicated combination of emotions, the most common of which seemed to be a borderline embarrassment in the moments where he nearly took her breath away with raw sincerity.

"Something simple, too," she amended her terms. "Nothing too complicated. I'd just like to talk to you somewhere that isn't this flat, maybe share a meal. Simple."

"I can do simple," Draco assured her, but he had a rather faraway look about him that reminded Hermione uncannily of Harry's own scheming face.

"I'm not sure I believe you," she said.

He looked back at her, a tidal wave of effort in the depths of his grey eyes.

"I'll make this perfect, Hermione. You can trust me." And he smiled again.

She was trying.

—

Hermione jumped when she heard the knock on the bathroom door. She'd barricaded herself inside almost the moment she got home from the longest day of sifting through reports at the Ministry she'd ever had to endure. Because as much as a small part of her brain chided

her for the delight she felt when she thought about her evening plans with Draco, she simply couldn't deny it. Hermione Granger was excited to go on a date with Draco Malfoy. It was an unfamiliar thought to have running through her head, so much so that she considered saying it out loud just to test the absurdity of such a statement in the real world.

She brought multiple outfit options with her into the bathroom, intentionally avoiding the more scandalous lingerie options she had available to her because there was no way she was anywhere close to ready for *that.* But she also couldn't control the treacherous *what-ifs* that reminded her that the drawer of silks and laces existed in the first place.

It was difficult for Hermione to remember the last time she felt such tiny thrills bolting through her in anticipation of something as simple as a date. She wondered if this was the last floodgate: allowing herself permission to feel, to accept whatever she'd obviously fallen for the first time with him, foreign as such a thing might have seemed to her in the beginning of all this.

"Are you ready?" came Draco's voice through the door.

Hermione released a tiny breath. She decided she was unreasonably nervous. And also, still not fully dressed. Her curls were managed; her primping minimal, but she hadn't decided on what she'd wear. This felt important. It might not be their first date for him, but it certainly was for her and there was something permanent—*irreparable*—about firsts. The pressure of it, self-imposed as it may be, had started to drive her a bit mad.

She stepped up to the door, imagining him on the other side, nothing but a thin barrier separating them.

"What should I wear?" she asked through the paneled wood. "How dressed up should I be? I have a few options in here."

She could almost hear his amusement carrying through the door.

"Casual," he said, voice slightly muffled by the obstacle between them. "I'm keeping it simple, per your request." That time she did actually hear a small chuckle. She smiled as she felt some of her own tension unwind. Casual was good, it settled some of the nerves carried on the weight of her expectations.

She ultimately decided on a pair of jeans and a silk blouse. Dressy

enough that it felt special, and intentionally red because representing Gryffindor just felt *right*.

She opened the door to find Draco leaning against the opposite wall, arms crossed in front of him, looking like mercury frozen solid and sculpted to perfection. He was one long line from head to heel: lean and lithe and luscious. Hermione wondered what temperature, what warmth drawn from a touch or taste, might cause him to melt into something liquid and just a little deadly. It had already happened behind his eyes, a silver swirl, her familiar whirlpool, drawing her in.

Any control she thought she had over the stutters and starts behind her ribs evaporated.

A smile melted the hard lines along his jaw. “You look lovely,” he said.

Still dancing around the idea of casual touch, of any touch whatsoever, not since their barely-there kiss, he granted her plenty of space as she exited the bathroom.

“Thank you,” she said, wishing she had some measure of control over the flushing under her skin. It was almost unpleasant, uncomfortable, in a way, to be looked at the way Draco observed her now. She had to look away, though she managed to return the compliment.

“You look quite handsome, yourself,” she said, proud that no panicked apparation needed to occur.

He must have taken her avoidance of eye contact as motivation to move, because he strolled by her, headed towards the door to the flat. He glanced back at her, still smiling, practically afloat in his good mood and damn near contagious with its effect.

“This way,” he said, gesturing to the door. “We’re walking.”

Casual indeed.

—

“I couldn’t think of a single thing to do that wasn’t related to a memory in some way,” he confessed as they exited their building. “In

that vein, I have no idea where we're going."

Well, this was not the start she'd been expecting to the perfect date he'd promised. She'd expected Draco to have every moment of their evening together planned to the second, meticulous in the same way he was when he brewed a potion, or when he recounted a story from their past. Instead, he offered something vague and nebulous and erring on the side of unusual.

"We're staying in muggle London, mostly so we don't get recognized," he continued. "But beyond that, we're picking together. So, how many minutes are you willing to walk to find somewhere to eat?"

Her brows knitted together, trying to make sense of the question.

"It's not a trick," he said. "How many minutes?"

"I— thirteen? I suppose."

He made a thoughtful noise. "Ominous, alright. I say we start left."

"And after thirteen minutes?" Hermione asked.

"You pick another direction and we find somewhere to have a quiet dinner."

Hermione's head cocked to the side, still deciphering what appeared to be a deceptively easy-going Draco Malfoy.

"Too simple?" he asked with a hint of concern. "I have a much more elaborate secondary option if you—"

"No," she said, meaning it. "This is perfect. I'm not ready for grand romantic gestures or anything of the sort just yet."

He released a breath mixed with a low chuckle.

"And when you are," he said. "I have them ready."

She might have laughed if he didn't look so devastatingly serious.

After thirteen minutes of walking, side by side but not quite touching, she steered them to the right and they found a small establishment that offered classic pub fare and an extensive beer menu. To his credit, Draco only looked moderately concerned as they settled into a booth opposite each other.

“I can safely say I would never have chosen this intentionally,” he said with an attempt at good humor, but his wariness slipped through.

Hermione couldn’t help the small laugh that formed. “I don’t know, it’s kind of charming.”

He still looked dubious, but settled slightly once he had a scotch on the table to distract his hands. Conversation lulled.

“Are you nervous?” she asked. His fidgeting had reached a peak with all the tilting and swirling he kept torturing his scotch with. The dose of confidence he’d had when they left the flat had faded, twisting into uneasy silences and fingers that didn’t stop tracing the edge of his tumbler. He hadn’t even tasted his drink.

“No,” he nearly snapped, then recoiled. “I—yes, sorry I didn’t mean that. I was better at this in my head.”

Hermione nearly convinced herself that she moved out of concern over the glass of scotch he’d been manhandling, but that was a bit of a weak excuse, and she knew it. She reached across the top of the table and pulled his hands from the glass. His fingers wound around hers in an elegant and practiced manner, his thumbs tracing easy patterns against her skin. He visibly relaxed, some of the tension in his shoulders sinking.

“I’m nervous, too,” Hermione said, more distracted than she expected to be by the assault of tiny sparks and hums coursing through her hands as they rested in his. He broke them apart just as the heat crawling up her skin began reaching a critical mass.

He pulled something from his pocket and offered it to her.

“I don’t know if you noticed the lack of photos in the flat,” he began. “I took them to Theo’s before you were released from the hospital, I didn’t want them to—I didn’t want you to be uncomfortable. And they were hard to see, for me too.”

She took the small square from his hands and flipped it over. Contained in a black frame was the looping image of her and Draco dancing together, caught mid-spin as he lifted an arm and allowed her a twirl beneath it. In the looping picture, she smiled broadly at him each time they came back together after the spin. He faced away from the camera, expression hidden. But she could see his fingers entwining with hers as his forehead dropped, pressed against her own in a fleeting moment of intimacy before the loop began again.

A slight sting alerted Hermione to the tears threatening to well.

“That’s from the Potter’s wedding,” he said, watching her carefully. “It’s our first photo together.” He paused, watching her struggle. “Hermione?” he asked, and it wasn’t really her name. It was a question, how was she doing?

She nodded, eyes tracking their looping dance as it played over and over in front of her face. An agony of dissociation nearly strangled her; the cavern between knowing and remembering grew to an impossible size.

Of all the things she could say, *thank you* or *this is hard* or *it hurts more than I thought it might,* she settled on the simplest option.

“We look happy,” she said.

He smiled. “I told you before; it was a perfect evening.”

She grieved for him, sudden and sharp, as her appointment from the day before invaded her thoughts. *Irreparable.* What if she could never have them back? Memories like the moment in her hands? And what if he couldn’t have them either? Forever out of step with the woman he’d shared them with. With the right context, she could know of the memories, but she still couldn’t remember them.

She didn’t know how she could possibly shatter his hope in the same way hers had been.

She glanced up at him, worried he might have caught her errant thoughts running across her face. Instead, he looked lost in his own head.

“What are you thinking?” she asked in an effort to avoid the tangle in her mind.

He shook his head, just once, a dismissive action. “Nothing.”

His hands found his glass again.

“Are you sure?”

“It was an unfair thought, unkind. Not worth sharing.”

“Oh.” A blink. “About me?”

“Hermione, I have no intentions of ruining this evening.”

She squared her shoulders, something in her psyche unwilling to let it drop.

“There’s hardly a single thing about this situation that’s fair, Draco. I’d hardly fault you for thinking so. Maybe you’d feel better if you shared it anyway.”

“Doubtful.”

“I’d like to know you,” she said. “You know—beyond just telling me about our past. I’d like to know more if I can.”

He pressed his lips together, a brow arched, perhaps waiting for her to bluff and back down. She didn’t.

He conceded, then bent his head towards the picture in her hands, still looping through a happy scene.

“That look on your face, like you trust me, I just miss it, is all. You’re the only person in the world who’s ever trusted me like that. And every time you look at me like you’re surprised I’m capable of something decent—” His mouth screwed up, a fight for the right words. “It’s just pretty fucking awful, to be honest. But I know that’s not your fault.”

“I’m sure Theo trusts you,” Hermione tried offering as guilt roiled her insides. How many times had she considered the novelty of his decency over the past few months? Probably more times than she could count. And he’d seen it.

“Not completely. Not the way you did. He’s smart enough to know that given the choice between you and him, he can’t trust me not sacrifice anything for you. And he wouldn’t be wrong.”

It was a ruthless, brutal sort of self-awareness. It should have unsettled her, scared her with its intensity.

“It’s just daunting—the task of earning that trust again. I’m not even sure how I did it the first time,” he concluded.

Seeing the conflict on his face, Hermione would have told him the answer, told him how to do it, if only she’d known herself.

In a much-needed break from the gravity of their conversation, their meals arrived, granting them a redirection. And Hermione found herself treated to the distinct pleasure that was watching Draco scowl

at pub food, finding something offensive about his chips.

“So, what’s the story with the sofa no one will tell me?” Hermione tried a new topic, something lighter. She grinned as she ate her own chips with zero complaints.

“Oh no, no. We’re trying to have a *good* time, remember? We’ve toed the line enough as it is.”

She glared at him. ”Honestly, between you and Theo, you’ve partly convinced me it’s something mythical. I think you might be exaggerating.”

“It’s already getting late. And as you mentioned, it's a Tuesday and we have work tomorrow. The history of that sofa is far too long to start now.”

“I expect better excuse-making from a Slytherin,” she told him.

He gave a short laugh but didn’t admit to his poor defenses.

“Theo wouldn’t even sit on it, you know,” she said.

That earned her a heartier laugh. “No, I expect he wouldn’t.”

She glared again, crossing her arms in front of her. She could dig her heels in, too. He nearly rolled his eyes at her as he slid the rest of his chips onto her plate with a look of relief to be rid of them.

“Fine, one thing,” he conceded. “Theo has—walked in on things, between us, on the sofa.”

Hermione’s eyes flashed, widening as she grasped his meaning.

“Twice,” he concluded, a smirk firmly planted on his face.

Hermione dissolved into a fit of laughter.

—

The rest of their meal played out with a perfect, almost rehearsed normalcy. They engaged in light, safe conversation, and Hermione got to practice making Draco smile, something that had the potential to

become a dangerous new hobby if she didn't manage it properly. Because he had such a nice smile under the sneer. She had a sudden urge to write to Theo and tell him all about the brief hand-holding they'd done, because it had made her feel wild and unsteady and she'd loved it.

And when they arrived back at their flat, Hermione leaned against the door, facing Draco, not quite ready to reenter that space and return to their routines.

"Thank you," she said, offering him a grateful smile. "This felt like progress, didn't it?"

The word *irreparable* tried to claw its way to the forefront of her mind. She ignored it, forging ahead, needing to savor the lovely little thing they'd planted and nurtured and grown over the last several hours. "I'm trying. You're trying. It's been—nice. So thank you. For being patient with me, especially."

She let her hand reach out, a fingertip lightly trailing down his forearm, an acknowledgement in the form of a tentative touch. She couldn't quite resist it, she wanted a small touch for herself.

He stepped closer. Mercury melted.

Hermione's breath caught, momentarily stunned by the severity behind his eyes.

He took another step, effectively caging her against the door. The silence between them sat heavy, punctuated only by the rush of her pulse roaring in her ears.

"I have been patient," he breathed, agreeing with her, and she could barely hear the words as they washed over her. She felt them more than anything. "I have been so patient," he repeated.

And he was so close, barely a blink between them. Six years hanging between lashes and lids and lips.

Hermione's eyes fluttered shut as she drew a shaky breath, suddenly unmoored in want. She couldn't look him in the eyes, not when there was so much of his own want reflected in them.

"Please, Hermione," he rasped.

Her eyes shot open. His right hand had found its way against the door

beside her head and each breath he took seemed to rock him as he stared at her, truly begging. “Could I please?” he asked again, something lethal lingering beneath the surface: permission and a promise.

She swallowed, struggling for words. She nodded.

She expected him to kiss her.

Instead, his left hand met the side of her neck, his fingers finding a place in the curls at the base of her skull, tiny points of pressure cradling her head as his thumb skimmed the length of her jaw.

She nearly blistered beneath his touch and yet, the only thought her mind could conjure in that moment was: *he’s left-handed.*

His hand moved, his eyes following its path. Her head fell back against the door, incapable of coherent thought as she witnessed the outright adoration on his face.

His fingers slipped to the front of her neck, skating between the open fabric at the top of her blouse and trailing downward until the tips of his fingers rested on the hollow at the base of her throat. His palm pressed against her chest, directly over her heart.

She knew he must have felt it hammering, almost painful in its attempt to escape her ribs and run away with the delicious feeling of his skin against hers. She reached out, her own palm finding purchase against the cool cotton of his shirt. Beneath it, his heart pounded just as fast. Her fingers curled, gripping the fabric beneath them.

She thought of his words the month before: a man on the gallows.

“I’m willing to offer a stay of execution,” she whispered, her fingers curling tighter. She didn’t have to finish the thought.

He pushed.

She pulled.

And finally—*finally*—his mouth found hers. His hand snaked its way back to the base of her neck, the other suddenly gripping her waist with an exquisitely indelicate force. She gripped his shirt tighter, her other hand joining the fray as his lips, warm and delicious and nothing like ice or mercury, devoured her.

She breathed a tiny whimper against his mouth as he pressed against her, eliminating every last atom between them that was not his or hers. She let her hands wander, lost in the soft strands of his hair, nails scraping against his scalp and neck.

His groan nearly buckled her knees. Desire rocked her, a hurtling Hogwarts Express crashing through sinew and bone and every last fiber of her being, lighting her on fire.

And all she could think, beneath the ravaging that was his lips moving against hers, the taste of his tongue in her mouth, and the commingling of breath that left her lightheaded, was a repetition of chastising thoughts.

Why did she wait so long?

Why did she fight it?

How could she not have *known?*

Chemistry, Ginny had called it. Chemistry didn't even begin to cover it.

His kiss was hungry, starving, skidding Hermione's ability to think, and overthink, to a sharp halt. Her sole focus narrowed to the idea of *more.* More of his teeth nipping at her bottom lip. More of his hand slipping beneath the hem of her blouse. More of the almost silent, reverent noises he made between breaths as he consumed her.

She sucked in an enormous breath, head spinning, as Draco's mouth wandered, worshipping her jaw, her neck, and a tiny patch of skin near her clavicle that made her toes curl. She didn't even know that spot existed, let alone that it could send such tremendous heat coursing through her veins.

She arched against him, utterly awash. And as she did so, her hips ground against his, a gift of friction. A curse slipped from his lips against her neck. Hermione nearly forgot to breathe altogether, her skin prickling, and flushing, and wanting *more.* She could feel the length of him, hard against her stomach as he rolled against her again, and her brain came roaring back to life.

She wasn't ready for that yet.

Sex on a schedule.

She wasn't ready for any kind of intimacy like that, not yet.

And that was why she'd waited.

She wanted more, but she needed time.

She pulled her hands from his hair, tiny moans still escaping her throat as his hips rocked against hers, his lips traveling a new path up her neck, leaving a smattering of gooseflesh in his wake. She pressed her palms against his chest and pushed with what little willpower she had left. When he kept kissing her, she tried again, more fractured force, as much as she could muster, and he shot back. He looked nearly as dazed as she felt.

"We should probably stop," she said, hating the shape of those words in her mouth. Her lungs felt like she'd just run up and down several flights of stairs.

He grinned at her: eyes glazed, lips ruddy, and hair falling forward into his face.

"Probably," he agreed, slowly. But the desire in his eyes betrayed the lie.

She had to tear her gaze away, turning around. The sight of a flushed, thoroughly snogged Draco Malfoy was not one she would soon be able to forget. She opened the door to the flat and entered, her steps unsteady.

"I should go to bed," she said. "Alone," she added, more to herself than to him.

When she turned back she saw that he had entered the flat behind her and now leaned against the other side of the door, on the other side of what had just exploded between them.

He almost looked like the arrogant Draco Malfoy she'd once known. He gave her a wink, grin slipping into a self-satisfied smirk. "I'll be on the sofa if you change your mind."

She shook her head, playing it off as a joke. But she still felt a thrill run through her regardless.

She was, and she did not think this lightly, entirely fucked.

Chapter End Notes

i love and appreciate kudos and comments if you feel so inclined

to let me know what you think!! also, come hang out with me on tumblr, its a good time!

art inspired by this chapter:
(Second) First Kiss by jaxx-in-a-box
Twirl by Efinna

Chapter 6: Pansy Parkinson

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Those born to wealth, and who have the means of gratifying every wish, know not what is the real happiness of life, just as those who have been tossed on the stormy waters of the ocean on a few frail planks can alone realize the blessings of fair weather."

— Alexandre Dumas, The Count of Monte Cristo

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June

As it turned out, the more things changed, the more they stayed the same. Instead of using her planner to schedule sex, Hermione used it to schedule kissing. Which was different, definitely different. And it certainly wasn't indicative of a dependency on structure that could bridge even the blank spaces between her synapses, lost to time. No, the schedule was born out of necessity and practicality.

Because once she'd kissed Draco, pressed against the door to their flat and lost to the weight of his body against hers, there was no way for her to exist in their home while keeping a straight head. The pull to him consumed her, an open flame in a room soaked with starter. Or rather, as if all the landmines in her life had been traded out. No longer exploding with confusion and frustration, but instead with affection and desire. This new type of landmine made functioning on a day-to-day basis exceptionally difficult.

So, weekdays were for work. They were for reliving memories over breakfast, participating in the humdrum of daily life, and enjoying simple conversations in the evening. But most importantly, weekdays were for research, an endless renewal of inquiry designed to scrub the *irreparable* fear from Hermione's head.

Sundays were for family and friends: visits with the Potters or her parents, key tenets to Hermione's sense of self.

This left Saturdays, the days she allowed herself to participate in the whimsy that was dating the husband she was only really getting to know. Three Saturdays passed this way. Three dates consisting of tentative touch, compelling conversation, and capped with the most sensational kisses of her entire life.

It troubled her how well Draco Malfoy could kiss. Or perhaps, how well he knew how to kiss her. He'd had around six years more practice with her than she did with him. And Hermione didn't much care for her disadvantage.

In this way, May slipped into early June. And in small moments, bracketed by her dysfunctional reality, Hermione caught glimpses of a normal life, of a different reality within her reach. It might not look like the normal life she'd expected, but it could still pass for normalcy on any day of her heavily scheduled week.

"What in Merlin's name are you brewing out here?" Hermione asked, pinching her nose as she entered the kitchen. Per usual, Draco had risen before her and already had tea prepared for them. As for whatever else he had brewing: it reeked.

"A waste of time," he grunted, tossing a letter down on the table. "A practical example of my skill set will not be necessary." He sank into a kitchen chair, releasing a deep breath as he vanished the contents of the nearby cauldron.

"A practical what?" Hermione asked, reaching for the discarded letter. "Oh, it's from Hogwarts—you've been rejected." Her voice fell. "When did you finish the application?"

"Two days ago."

"And they've *already* rejected you?" Hermione couldn't help the indignation pitching in her tone.

"Only took Minerva one day to turn me down last year." He drummed his fingers on the tabletop, steadily increasing in speed.

"A day? That's hardly enough time to even review your—" she paused, frown forming. "You're not even being considered, are you?"

"I suspect not."

"Because of your past? You received a full acquittal. Under the law, potential employers can't discriminate against—"

Hermione jolted when Draco rose suddenly, a smile spreading across his face. He rounded the table, approaching her. His hands found the sides of her face. She drew in a shallow breath, a landmine of want exploding beneath her.

“I know it's only a Tuesday and you have other things to focus on,” he started, voice dipping as his words skittered across her skin. His right hand began to wander, trailing fingers gliding up and down her neck, to the back of her head, winding in her unruly morning curls. “But the last time we had this conversation, you were of a much different opinion and it’s—well, I’ve missed having you on my side.” He offered her a smirk, but at their close distance, she could see the sheepishness creeping in at its edges.

She opened her mouth to respond but closed it again as the tip of his thumb ghosted over her bottom lip, gone before she’d even registered it, but long enough to send her willpower unraveling.

She swallowed.

“One kiss,” she said, already allowing herself to melt under his touch and tremendously grateful that she’d brushed her teeth before entering the kitchen that morning.

“So generous,” he murmured, still smirking, as he brought his lips to hers.

It was a new kind of kiss. She’d had the frenzy; she’d had the passion. But this kiss was lazy, it was a thank you, it was a connection forged on shared breath, sealed by the tug of his teeth against her bottom lip. Equal to the others, it still left her breathless: reeling and dizzy. He held his forehead against her own, just briefly, as they came apart. He grinned, eyes finding hers in the blink’s worth of distance between them: a whirlpool. He swooped in for a second kiss, a quick peck, before retreating back to the table.

“That,” Draco began. “Is the perfect way to turn around an awful morning.” He sat back in his chair, appraising her.

“I said *one* kiss,” Hermione reprimanded with absolutely no resolve behind her words. She still felt a little winded, off-kilter by way of proximity, as she took a seat across from him and helped herself to tea and toast.

His smirk grew.

“You know, I take it as the highest compliment that you feel like you have to ration time with me so you can *focus.”* He teased the last word, looking far too smug for his own good. “I’m rather enjoying being a distraction.” He sipped his tea, a poor affectation of innocence on his face.

Hermione narrowed her eyes in his direction, trying desperately to ignore the spreading heat across her cheeks.

“Do you enjoy making me blush?” she asked.

“Gods yes, so much.”

Her eyes narrowed further.

“What story do I get this morning?” she asked, suppressing a simultaneous sigh and smile. He was being intentionally incorrigible and she had no intention of rewarding him. No matter how much it strained the muscles in her cheeks to swallow her grin. She slapped jam on her toast and avoided looking at him. Because if she did, she knew she’d break.

“We’ve reached Christmas with your parents. It was 2003, our first Christmas together—well, officially together.”

Hermione perked up.

“My parents like you,” she said.

Draco laughed. “Despite a very unfortunate misunderstanding that first Christmas, yes.”

Hermione took a bite of her toast. She lifted a brow and looked up at him.

Roles reversed, Draco suddenly had a slight flush about him. He pressed his lips together, clearly deep in thought as he considered how to start.

“Go on. Now I’m curious,” Hermione prompted, probably enjoying his reticence more than she should.

“Honestly, it’s mortifying. Your father still brings it up regularly. And I’m fairly certain your mother thought I was a mass murderer.” He closed his eyes, brows stitching together as he let out a low groan. “Of course, we haven’t quite gotten around to breaking it to her that the

more accurate descriptor is mass murderer-adjacent."

She caught the brief moment his fingers tapped at his Dark Mark through the material of his shirt. It was fleeting, but an acknowledgment of the past there, regardless.

"Draco," Hermione said, torn between a sense of morbid curiosity and tenuous amusement. "What exactly did you do?"

He cleared his throat, some of the redness in his neck retreating.

"I misjudged the extent of the cultural gap between magical and muggle."

A pause. Hermione waited.

"It was new to me, obviously. And, well—*you've* seen some of the things that passionate witches and wizards might collect in their offices as it relates to the subject of their work."

Another pause. His fingers started drumming against the grain of the table again.

"You'd told me they worked with teeth, which I thought was odd but assumed was just a muggle oddity I didn't understand."

He paused again and Hermione broke. "You'll have to get to the point eventually, Draco."

He groaned again, then grimaced.

"I assumed their work was more academic than practical. Obviously, there's no equivalent for what they do in the magical world. And I should have consulted you but I was quite proud of my choice, to be honest. It was a rather rare and unique acquisition." Only a moment's pause this time as Draco's eyes met hers before immediately finding something else to focus on. "I gifted them a very lovely display of an ancient human mandible with an exceptional number of teeth still intact."

Hermione blinked, watching as the redness crept back up Draco's neck.

She burst into laughter, huge gulping laughs that left her stomach cramped and tears leaking from the corners of her eyes.

"Oh my gods," she managed to wheeze as her laughter died. Draco sat

patiently, unamused and still tinged slightly pink. “You gave my parents a human jawbone for Christmas?”

“It wasn’t nearly this amusing at the time,” he deadpanned.

“I don’t know, that’s fairly hilarious by any standard.”

“Truly, it wasn’t. Your parents were still working through their resentment towards magic after the war and you had to bring your wizard boyfriend to Christmas dinner where I—well, I didn’t exactly help the case that we’re not all that different.”

Hermione’s giggles transformed into a fond smile. “It’s wonderful that you wanted to try and prove that. You’d clearly had quite the change of heart.”

She meant it as a compliment, as a warm, genuine acknowledgment of work that he’d done to change himself for the better. But even as she said it, she braced for the potential that he might take it poorly, be offended in some way.

Instead, he chuckled, and with an astounding nonchalance said, “well I was madly in love with a Muggleborn witch and wanted nothing more than for her parents to approve of me, so of course I’d had a change of heart.”

On an intellectual level, Hermione knew that he must love her. Why else would the man have endured the last half-year of his life? But he hadn’t ever acknowledged it out loud. Not in such plain terms. And not to her. She assumed he avoided saying it so as not to overwhelm, like most of the other things he played close to the chest.

She just hadn’t expected to hear it said so casually over jam and toast and tea first thing on a Tuesday morning.

He must have noticed her sifting through the shrapnel of that particular landmine. But he didn’t leave her to wade through the destruction alone. Her heart leapt when he helped her pick through the pieces.

“Too much?” he asked.

“Surprising,” Hermione said. “That’s all.”

“I would have hoped it’s not surprising at all,” he said. He caught and held her gaze, disarming in its intensity and openness, not a single

shard of emotion out of place.

“I don’t want to make you uncomfortable and I don’t want you to feel like we’re not—” he fumbled. “Like we’re not working together and on the same page. So when you’re ready to hear—that—more directly, just let me know.”

Hermione nodded, incapable of breaking her gaze from his. That single moment of eye contact, if stretched end to end, would have been infinitesimal, a blip in a bigger picture. But in the landscape of all the missing time inside Hermione’s head, it became one of the single longest moments of her life, stretched between stares, meaning much more.

“I need to head to work,” Draco said, ending the small eternity they’d stepped into. “I’ll be late tonight, too.”

“You will?”

His demeanor shifted, just by a hair, but enough that the ease he’d been carrying disappeared.

“I have a legal meeting—and not another assault, don’t worry.”

“I should hope not. The one time was enough.”

“Right. The one time,” he hedged. “It’s just regarding my Gringotts accounts. It’s—a long story that’s on the list. And today of all days is just—not the right day for it.”

“Ok.”

“Ok?” He seemed surprised she hadn’t pushed.

“I trust you’ll tell me,” she said. He blinked at her, a certain level of awe settling across his face. Hermione had to take a sip of her tea to conceal the slight wobble in composure such a look caused her.

“Oh,” he finally said. “Right.”

She shrugged. “I’ve always imagined aristocrats spent their time embezzling from trusts or something anyway, so have fun.”

He laughed and then stared at her for a moment. He had the look of a man who didn’t quite believe in the sight before him. He shook his head, a slight ‘huh’ puffing from his mouth before he walked to the Floo.

He looked at her one last time, as if considering saying something else, but he didn't. He threw the powder down and vanished in a flash of green.

—

Hermione barely had time to take another bite of her toast before the Floo roared back to life. She expected it to be Draco. He'd left in such an odd state she wouldn't have been surprised if he'd forgotten something.

But instead, Theodore Nott walked through.

"Morning, light of my life," he greeted cheerily.

"Good morning to you too, Theo," Hermione replied with caution.

"Oh, Hermione. Nice to see you, I was just saying hello to Crookshanks here."

Consistent as ever, Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Sorry to rush you, Theo, but I have to leave for work soon," Hermione began. She had a prickling sensation that the man was up to something. Which, to be fair, would be consistent with what she'd observed in nearly every interaction she'd had with him thus far.

Theo swept Crookshanks into his arms, target-locked on the treat jar in the kitchen, and completely ignoring that Hermione had things to do.

"Do you feed him treats every time you see him?" Hermione asked. "It's no wonder he likes you so much. You've bought his loyalty."

"There's nothing wrong with leveraging what motivates people," he said, then looked pointedly at the cat in his arms and shrugged. "Or cats."

Hermione glanced at the clock.

"I have to leave in ten minutes, Theo. What do you need?"

"Ah—yes about that. I've already been in touch with your boss, told

her that Nott Manor has a rather cantankerous grandfather clock imbued with dark magic that needs decommissioning and we'll only accept the fabled Hermione Granger to do the job."

Hermione gaped, nonplussed.

Theo just shrugged again.

"I—*wait,* you what?" Hermione scrambled for the right words, the right question. "And my boss just accepted that?"

"Well, you decommissioned the Manor the first time, so I felt like it would be reasonable to request you back. And it's not like they have you doing anything worthwhile they can't spare you from." He heaved a sigh and gave Crookshanks another treat. "I swear, if I have to listen to Draco complain about how they're wasting your talents for another minute I'm going to—"

"I decommissioned Nott Manor?"

"For most of last year, yes," Theo said, reaching for yet another treat.

Hermione swatted at his hand. "He's had enough."

Theo shared an exasperated look with her cat.

"You know, speaking of your decommissioning of Nott Manor, strange how that topic came up so organically, isn't it? You wouldn't happen to know where you stashed some of my more—exceptionally illegal objects, would you?"

He released Crookshanks, though the cat remained faithfully near Theo's feet as the man peered cautiously in the direction of the living room.

"And why, exactly, would I have those objects here when they should have been turned into the Ministry?"

Theo took an exaggerated step over a particularly large stack of books, giving the sofa a wide berth, and sidestepping the surplus coffee table that cramped the space. Hermione abandoned her hopes of finishing her toast and followed him into the living room, apparently no longer in need of Flooing to the Ministry.

"Because you're a wonderful friend who so graciously agreed that I would not fare well in Azkaban."

“Merlin, Theo, how illegal are these objects?”

“Oh, nothing *too* offensive,” he started, continuing his not-so-casual evaluation of the room. He stepped back over another barrier of books and into the corridor. Hermione followed, equally as confused as she was fascinated. “Just a few unregistered portkeys to unsavory places, an experimental time turner I was fiddling with, a tiny clutch of chimera eggs—"

“Chimera eggs?” Hermione nearly shouted. Theo whirled at the sound of her shock so close behind him. “Chimera eggs are a Class A Non-Tradeable Material. Are you *joking* Theo?”

To his credit, Theo winced. His gaze flickered to the locked and warded guest room. Hermione caught the motion.

“Oh no,” she started. “Please tell me I don’t have *chimera eggs* in my guest room. Hopefully they’re under a stasis charm—gods, no wonder we were going to make the room unplottable.”

“In my defense, you found much worse stuff than that at the Manor, these things just happened to be mine and not my father’s. I did a little dabbling after the war, wayward times and all—oh, please stop looking at me like that, I’m reformed!”

“Dabbling? With portkeys and time turners and *chimera eggs?”* Hermione sucked in a breath, trying to wrangle her horror. She’d worked in the Control of Magical Creatures Department; she was intimately familiar with the consequences of possession of a Class A Non-Tradeable.

And apparently she’d protected Theodore Nott from those consequences. She almost laughed, a geyser of absurdity bursting from her outrage. “I suppose we really are good friends, then,” she mused as the fight drained out of her.

Theo seemed caught off guard by her shift. He cocked his head to the side.

“Well, I only break the law for my friends,” she clarified. “Historically speaking.”

Honestly, she’d expected Theo to look slightly more impressed.

“Whatever you say, Granger,” he said. “You work for me today. Let’s go.”

“You don’t want to try breaking in to get your stuff?” she asked, nodding towards the sealed guest room.

Theo shrugged. “Just a passing fancy. I was mostly curious.”

“Well, I don’t believe that for a single second."

Theo winked at her, smiling. “Good, you’re learning. Now, come on.”

—

Unsurprisingly, Nott Manor contained no cantankerous grandfather clocks imbued with dark magic that Hermione needed to bend to her will. Instead, there were gardens, lounge chairs, books, and an unending supply of tea and biscuits should she desire.

Hermione *almost* felt bad for being paid to lounge around Nott Manor. But Draco’s sentiments weren’t wrong; she was being completely wasted reviewing reports. If she weren’t so otherwise intellectually indisposed by her personal research into her memory problems, she would have fought for her regular responsibilities back. But as it stood, she needed one simple, easy thing in her life.

Besides, she couldn’t exactly deny how nice it felt to sit and relax under the sun, surrounded by fragrant flowers, heavy in their bloom, with Theo chattering beside her. It was a companionable sort of way to spend her morning and afternoon.

“Can I ask you a favor? A serious one?” Theo posed randomly, just as Hermione had started blurring the lines between waking and sleeping.

She found herself suddenly alert.

“I’m not stashing any more illegal objects for you,” she replied.

“Nothing like that. More like a small favor, maybe a little tough love.”

“More tough love?” Hermione asked. “I assumed congratulations would have been in order. Since I’m sure Draco’s told you.”

“Oh, he’s told me,” Theo confirmed.

Hermione forced one eye open, squinting against the sun. She tilted

slightly so that she could see Theo lounging nearby. He had a brow raised at her, propped up on one arm against his lounger, and looking far too casually wealthy for a Tuesday afternoon.

“Do we ever spend time together without an ulterior motive?” Hermione asked him, pulling herself into a sitting position.

“There’s motive in everything I do,” Theo said. “Otherwise, what’s the point? But, regardless, you’re right, congratulations are in order. I hear there was hand-holding. And kissing. And maybe a little bit of *gyrating.”*

The sip of water Hermione had just taken fell back into her glass as she sputtered.

“You and Draco are too close,” she concluded. She would have to speak to Draco about it.

But Theo only laughed, clapping his hands together. “I *knew* there was gyrating. He would only admit to the kissing. Disappointingly tight-lipped. *You* on the other hand—”

Hermione should have been annoyed at him. She should have tossed the rest of her water at him. Or at the very least sent a stinging hex in his direction. But there was just something so frustratingly likable about Theo’s face, especially when painted with glee as it was in that moment. Hermione couldn’t force the energy to be mad about being outmaneuvered.

As pleased as he seemed to be with himself, Theo sobered quickly.

“Just—please don’t hurt him. That’s it, that’s the favor,” Theo said. “He finally seems a little more like himself. You too, in a way.”

“I’m not trying to hurt him,” Hermione said, feeling the lines forming on her forehead as her brows drew together. Of everything Theo had said that day, discussion of illegal objects included, the implication she might hurt Draco concerned her the most.

“I’m sure you’re not,” Theo said. “But you’ve started this for him again, you know. Letting him take you on a date, letting him kiss you like you’re his wife again. Now the man’s got hope.”

Irreparable scraped its way beneath her skin, a painful absence of hope. She hadn’t told Draco that particularly unsettling development; she couldn’t bear it. But her healers hadn’t mentioned it again either.

Their June appointment focused instead on developing their new theories and encouraging her that hope wasn't lost. *Yet* hung beneath the bright lights of that examination room, vile and sickly and begging to be acknowledged.

She clung to the pedantic, at a loss for the rest of it.

"I've been his wife this whole time."

Theo actually rolled his eyes at her, flopping dramatically back on his chair.

"Trust me, I've seen the two of you as man and wife." He waved his hand generally in Hermione's direction in a gesture that said *the words are right here, take them,* but eventually he settled on, "it's different."

And somehow, in the space between them, lounging and casual and having an uncomplicated afternoon together, Hermione found the words he'd alluded to, hanging between them. The words were right there, and she took them.

But she didn't give them to Theo. They were hers. And they were meant for Draco. Because she realized, under the implication that she might hurt him, that she didn't want to do anything of the sort. Because she cared about Draco. She wasn't just growing fond of his company. She didn't just enjoy the feeling of his mouth pressed against hers. She wasn't just opposed to hurting him out of a sense of altruism. *She cared about Draco Malfoy.* And that idea, in such stark and concrete terms, snuck up on her. They were words tied to emotion, slowly climbing out of the black hole of lost time in her mind. It felt almost like memory, an imprint of something on her soul that not even the erasure of events could take away.

"Also, fair warning. Pansy is back from France."

Hermione had nearly forgotten where she was, what she was doing, so lost in the ache emanating from behind her ribs, stifling her lungs.

"Parkinson?" she managed to croak in question.

Theo sat back up, looking at her with questions behind his eyes.

"Yes, Parkinson." But his eyes asked her if she was okay.

"I take it I know Pansy?" Hermione asked, telling him silently that she was and she wasn't and she was nearly everything in between.

“You do. And she’s bound to go nuclear,” Theo added. A brow raised, asking if she was sure.

“Did I teach you that muggle phrase, too?” she asked. She was sure, as sure as she could be.

He gave her a small smile, letting the silent questions drop. His countenance shifted, overtly joyous, commandeering the mood between them and forcing it to do his bidding. He laughed.

“Granger, I’ve lost count on how many muggle history speeches I’ve had to sit through once you’ve had one drink too many. That second big war comes up a lot, something about parallels and history repeating and the *power of knowledge.* You get very worked up.”

“Second *World* War. Theo, the whole world was involved, you can’t pretend like you don’t know that.”

“Right Granger, and you rode a dragon out of Gringotts, as well.”

She didn’t know if he was kidding with her. She wasn’t sure she wanted to know. She shook her head, afraid for whichever version was true.

“And what, praytell, does a nuclear Pansy Parkinson entail?” she asked.

“There’s the whole matter of being told to give you space for—well, nearly six months now. And then she found out that I ignored Draco and contacted you anyway.” He paused, considering. He didn’t do a very good job concealing the flash of worry that darted across his features. “Honestly, though, I think she’s mostly annoyed Draco didn’t kill me. Because if she’d known—well. Now she does. So, she’ll turn up.”

“Theo,” Hermione started, words slow. “Why do I get the impression you’re asking for forgiveness and not permission? What have you done?”

Theo jumped to his feet, reaching out and taking the glass of water from Hermione’s grip. He glanced at the sky, at Hermione, back at the Manor, and once more at her before whirling to set her glass down. With a medley of vague gestures, he managed to lure Hermione to stand.

“If, hypothetically, I did something,” he began, taking a small but

measured step away from Hermione. “I would have, hypothetically, done so under threat of hexing and dissolution of friendship by one very angry Pansy Parkinson.”

He took another step back.

“And so, hypothetically, the thing I did was an act of friendship, really, and therefore of most noble intentions, especially to a Gryffindor heart such as yours.”

Hermione took a step towards him as he took another one back.

“In less hypothetical terms, what did you do?” she asked, leveling him with her best demanding stare.

He straightened, holding a bit of his ground.

He cleared his throat and then in what was very nearly a single word strung on one long breath he spilled, “I-rekeyed-the-wards-at-your-flat-to-accept-Pansy. This has been lovely, but I’m needed elsewhere. See you, Granger.”

The next moment, he’d apparated. He’d apparated away from his own home. Probably because he knew she might throttle him. Cagey, self-preserving, Slytherins. It was frustrating how much she liked him. Though, in that moment, she very seriously considered tracking him down and smacking him.

—

Pansy Parkinson sat at Hermione’s kitchen table. Across from her, Crookshanks had taken up residence in a seat of his own, staring her down with his too-alert gaze. Hermione’s theory about the cat’s soft spot for Slytherins crumbled.

Neither pair of eyes looked at Hermione as she apparated into the flat, fully expecting something much more dramatic with the word nuclear being thrown around so casually.

With a sigh, Pansy sent a sneer at the cat before finally acknowledging Hermione. She raised a dark, perfectly sculpted brow, narrowed her eyes to slits, and pursed her painted lips. Between her clothes, posture,

and the air of authority she carried, Pansy Parkinson might have been the most put-together looking person Hermione had ever seen. The image warred with her memory of an obnoxious, pug-faced teenager.

Hermione didn't know what to say. Or how to react. She didn't have any context for what her relationship with Pansy looked like. Neither Harry nor Ginny mentioned any of Draco's friends at all. And Draco's recounting of their life had barely reached 2004. His friends hadn't made many appearances thus far. And beyond all that, Hermione couldn't remember any interaction she'd ever had with Pansy that wasn't outright nasty.

Hermione frowned at the recollection, patting her pocket to confirm the location of her wand.

Pansy rolled her eyes and stood. She crossed her arms and approached Hermione, an eery sort of quietness and observation consuming her. She walked a slow circle around Hermione. Only by the good graces of Gryffindor courage did Hermione avoid a cringe at the prickle of discomfort she felt when Pansy disappeared behind her before reemerging on the other side.

"So you don't remember me at all?" Pansy asked finally, standing in front of Hermione once more, her arms still crossed. A perfectly lacquered finger tapped impatiently on her forearm.

"I remember you," Hermione answered. "Just nothing after 2001."

Pansy pressed her lips together, her bright red lipstick entirely disappearing for a moment. Pansy's arms fell. Hermione had never imagined the act of uncrossing one's arms could look threatening, but the way Pansy went about it had the tint of something slightly less than sane.

"Alright Granger, this is how we're going to do this," Pansy said, tone clipped. Hermione realized she still hadn't moved from the spot where she'd apparated into the flat. "I'm going to tell you what you need to know and then you're going to tell me what the *fuck* you're wearing."

Pansy didn't elaborate.

"Well?" Hermione prompted. Pansy blinked.

"Oh, I was just waiting for you to protest. *Clearly* you've had a head injury."

Out of principle, Hermione said nothing.

Pansy let out a breath. “This is going to be unpleasant,” she announced but went no further. Anticipation had started to settle into something uncomfortable in Hermione’s stomach. Either Pansy had a flare for dramatics like Theo or she really wasn’t going to like whatever came next.

“So, you’re my best friend,” Pansy announced.

Hermione might have opened her mouth to speak if she’d had any control over her motor functions in that moment. Instead, her internal monologue erupted in confused laughter, sputtering and stuttering over the complete preposterousness of that statement.

“And yes, I’m well aware that I’m not *your* best friend, but I’m working on it. The weaslette’s days are numbered. Though losing years of work is exceptionally annoying.”

This time, Hermione did actually try to speak, to protest the madness that had just descended upon her kitchen. But Pansy’s hand shot up and Hermione’s words caught on the enormous engagement ring in front of her face. The sight of it reminded Hermione of the ring she didn’t wear, didn’t even know, and didn’t know how to ask about anymore.

“Could you please not fight me on this?” Pansy asked. “We have things we need to do today and not much time left to do them because Theo’s a selfish bastard.”

“Pansy,” Hermione started, finally dragging her feet from where she’d been stock-still since apparating. She needed tea. “If I’m your best friend, why did Theo have to effectively break you into my home by rekeying the wards? It seems like the closest people in my life already have access.”

Pansy let out a sharp, singular laugh. “Allegedly I have trouble with boundaries.” The sneer on her face suggested that she did not agree with that particular assessment.

Hermione, however, observing the present breaking and entering situation, found she quite agreed.

“So what is it we have to do today?” Hermione asked, resigning herself to whatever plans another Slytherin intended for her. It had become a bit of a concerning trend in her life. And, admittedly, it was

more interesting than paperwork. “I assume Theo didn’t get me out of a day’s work just so we could relax in his gardens.”

“Well, I certainly wouldn’t put *that* past him. He is extremely lazy.” Pansy crossed her arms again, an evaluating glare as she looked Hermione up and down. “Seriously, what the *fuck* are you wearing? We’ve put far too much work into your wardrobe to have you revert to your old ways.”

“They’re the only ways I remember, Pansy,” Hermione snapped.

Pansy didn’t acknowledge the offense. She only made a slight humming noise and kept staring at Hermione, who’d begun busying herself with the act of making tea. Hermione needed something to distract her from the anomaly in her kitchen.

Pansy cleared her throat, a kind of uncertainty overtaking her body language. She walked up to Hermione, determination swallowing her.

“Could I just—only once, I promise,” Pansy started with a small grimace. And before Hermione could decide where that statement was headed, Pansy pulled her into a short, but forceful hug. “I’m really glad you’re okay. Alright?”

Pansy tore away nearly as quickly as she’d catapulted herself into the hug in the first place, taking a step backward and turning away.

Oh. Well, that was unexpected.

Pansy turned back towards her, ineffable in her composure once again.

“We need to find you something else to wear. *Gods,* I bet you’re wearing those awful bras again, too. Then we need to strategize what your evening with Draco is going to look like because apparently I’m the only person properly equipped to prep you for this.”

“I’m sorry. Prep me for what, exactly?” Hermione asked, not following the wild leaps in logic Pansy’s words had taken.

Pansy sighed, but the look she gave Hermione wasn’t entirely one of contempt or judgement. There was something softened underneath, strangely akin to pity.

“Do you know what today is?” she asked Hermione.

“Tuesday?” she ventured.

“I won’t concede to the technicality. Do you know the significance of the date?”

“It’s what—the fifth? I don’t think I do, should I?”

“It’s Draco’s birthday. And he’s been really weird about the past couple of years and so you should probably be prepared.”

Hermione reeled, confusion and denial swarming her thoughts.

“I—no, that can’t be right Pansy. I just talked to him this morning, he didn’t say anything about—"

“Of course he didn’t. He’s probably trying to pretend it’s not happening because he’s an idiot.”

Hermione bristled at the insult.

“Oh, that’s cute.” Pansy smirked, grabbing at Hermione’s arm and dragging her towards the bedroom. “We need to get you changed.”

“Pansy, I thought I was working at the Ministry today, I wasn’t trying to impress anyone,” Hermione said, not entirely seeing the issue with her pencil skirt and basic blouse.

Pansy made a disgusted noise, pushing the door to the closet open. “That’s your problem,” she said. “There’s always someone to impress. And since Draco’s going to be difficult and not want to go out or acknowledge his birthday in any way, you might as well look good for it even if you’re stuck here the whole time.”

Pansy turned to her abruptly. “Are you sleeping with him?”

“Alright Pansy, I think we need to revisit those boundaries. I don’t really know you well enough for—"

“So you’re not, then? I suppose that means operation progeny is on hold.” She shrugged. “That’s fine with me, I think you’ll be much less fun as a parent.”

Hermione gaped, a riot erupting inside her head.

“I’m sorry,” she started. “Did you just—"

Pansy turned from where she’d already begun rifling through

Hermione's side of the closet, a curious furrow to her brow as she watched Hermione spin her wheels.

"You know we were trying to—" Hermione tried again, the lilt of her question reaching near a screech.

"Procreate? Burden the world with your spawn? Of course I know," Pansy said, then paused. "Was it a secret?"

"It was to me until a couple of months ago."

Pansy shrugged again. "Well, I'm sure it wasn't an easy thing for Draco to bring up." She returned her attention to the closet, her world an easy black and white against the color in the closet.

Hermione wasn't often left feeling speechless, or worse, like she'd lagged behind in her understanding, but the past few minutes she'd spent with Pansy Parkinson seemed to soar straight over her head, leaving her grasping for comprehension.

"Also," Pansy continued, breezing by a topic that had damn near toppled Hermione not so long ago. "When are you and Draco coming back for Friday drinks? Theo, Blaise, and I do not a party make, no matter how fun I am."

It was just another thing soaring over Hermione's head.

"Friday drinks?"

Pansy heaved a heavily affected sigh, shoving a dress into Hermione's arms. "Fucking Draco," she muttered. "Every Friday, it's a standing engagement at Nott Manor. We drink, we hang out, sometimes we gamble. And as painful as it is to admit, we're wanting for our resident Gryffindor. Being in the same room as Blaise and Theo for an extended time, especially with alcohol involved, is incredibly trying on my patience."

"I do research on Fridays."

"Well, reschedule it."

"I'd rather not, I'm not sure I'm ready for—"

"Where's your planner? I'll reschedule it for you."

Pansy blew past her, scanning the bedroom with a predatory efficiency. Still clutching the dress that had been deposited in her

arms, Hermione followed.

“Pansy, stop.”

Pansy did not stop.

“Pansy,” Hermione tried again, trailing. “This is a little much, could you just—stop rifling through my drawers, Merlin.”

Pansy paused. She slid the bedside table drawer shut, and tapped her foot impatiently. She crossed her arms as Hermione watched her, agitation settling.

“Alright,” Pansy said. “I didn’t mean to *cross boundaries.”* Sincerity did not appear to be a skill Pansy Parkinson possessed.

“Blaise has some work to do in Italy for the next couple of weeks, and honestly, I enjoyed the break from them while I was in France. So we’ll probably just suspend Fridays until next month. Do you think that is enough time for you to adjust to the idea?” She’d phrased it as a question while simultaneously posing it as a challenge.

Hermione straightened her spine. “Should be plenty of time.”

“Good.”

“Good.”

“Put the dress on, Granger.”

Hermione huffed at the order but did it anyway, slipping back inside the closet to disrobe and ignoring the snicker about her modesty from Pansy. It was a simple black dress, long sleeves, hem just above the knee, form-fitting but not suctioned to her skin. Yet again, Hermione hadn’t even known it was hiding the closet. Annoyingly, it looked great on her from what Hermione could see, and worse, she didn’t mind wearing it.

When Hermione emerged from the closet, Pansy’s relief was a near-tangible object in the room with them.

“So much better,” Pansy said. “I didn’t even traumatize you, either. You always look like I’m going to put you in something awful, and every time, you like it.”

Given the fact that Hermione felt partially like a hostage in her own home, she had no desire to acknowledge the truth in Pansy’s words.

“Why doesn’t Draco want to celebrate his birthday?” Hermione asked, sneaking a sideways glance at herself in the dresser mirror.

“Well, it hasn’t exactly been easy since the epic Christmas at Malfoy Manor.”

“And when was that?” Hermione asked, her mind whirling with images of the Manor blanketed in snow, of Christmas trees and mistletoe and Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy engaging in anything even remotely festive. They were difficult images to conjure, even for a witch.

Pansy had started rummaging through the modest jewelry collection that sat atop the dresser. “Two Christmases ago, maybe?” Pansy said. “2004, I think.”

Pansy steered Hermione back towards the mirror, testing a silver necklace against the dress. She evaluated the reflection before tutting, trying for a gold option instead. With a frown, Pansy tapped the tiny silver scar running along Hermione’s right eyebrow, the same unidentified scar she’d noticed her first night back from St. Mungo’s.

“Is there a reason you don’t use that fancy potion of Draco’s on this?”

Hermione felt warm, uncomfortable, a kind of anticipation like she was on the ledge of something, with Pansy about to push. She didn’t know how to answer.

“I can’t imagine Draco likes the reminder of that night staring at him every time he looks at you,” Pansy continued, deciding on the gold necklace. Pansy’s eyes flickered to Hermione’s left hand and away again in the space of a breath.

Hermione touched a finger to her nearly invisible scar.

“I don’t even notice it most days, honestly.”

“Well, he might.” Pansy pushed. Closer to the edge. “And if he does it’s probably not a pleasant thing to remember.”

Still touching the tiny scar, Hermione caught Pansy’s stare in the reflection of the mirror. So she had a scar. A scar from a Christmas dinner with the Malfoys?

“It couldn’t have been that bad, could it?” Hermione asked, hoping to temper the sort of doom Pansy peddled.

Pansy just snorted.

“Well, it couldn’t have been any worse. Being disinherited certainly put a damper on Draco’s sense of identity.”

Pushed to the ledge, Hermione hurtled over it.

—

Hermione had fought in a war.

She broke into and bested a trapped gauntlet guarding the Philosopher’s Stone when she was twelve years old.

She broke Sirius Black out of a guarded tower when she was fourteen.

She fought a battle inside the Department of Mysteries when she was sixteen.

She broke back into the Ministry of Magic at eighteen. Then into Bellatrix Lestrange’s Gringotts vault at the same age. She withstood torture. She snuck into Hogwarts while it was under Death Eater control.

She’d fought in a bloody war.

Which was to say, Hermione knew something about strategy. She knew a little something about picking her battles, about compartmentalization, and prioritization, and suppressing her greater instincts to brute force a problem because that was the fastest way from point A to point B, regardless of the collateral damage. Especially now that she’d seen some of what that damage could look like between her and Draco.

So, after unceremoniously kicking Pansy out of the flat, only after promising that she would seriously consider returning to Friday night drinks whenever the social event resumed, Hermione sat on the green sofa in the living room and picked her battle.

And as she looked around her tiny, cramped, overstuffed flat with fresh eyes, loaded with new context, she had to suppress an uncomfortable laugh. The first time she saw the space she’d asked if they were moving or redecorating, shocked to confusion by the size

and the flat and density of possessions within it.

No, it appeared they'd just downsized. Significantly.

He'd said he'd do anything for her. He'd been completely honest about that. He'd said it more than once, in different ways. And she believed him, to an extent. But she never could have imagined disinheritance as part of what that *anything* entailed . Because, after all, who was Draco Malfoy without his wealth and his family name behind him?

And just that morning. *Gods.* Just that morning.

A legal meeting about his Gringotts accounts. And she'd joked that he might be embezzling from his trust. He said the story was on the list. That he'd tell her. And she believed him, she really did. She chose, consciously, to believe him.

A bubble of laughter escaped her, ripping Hermione from her thoughts.

Because as absurd and overwhelming as it was to learn that Draco had been disinherited, the only battle Hermione wanted to fight was the one about his birthday.

She was surrounded by shrapnel and she didn't even mind.

Because she cared about him, and the memory of that feeling lived on the surface of her soul, not in the grey matter in her mind. And as such, she didn't want him to hate his birthday. She wanted, desperately, to bring him a tiny piece of happiness. She wanted him to have hope where hers faltered.

She leaned back on the sofa, a headache throbbing behind her eyes. Her brain felt overworked and exhausted from an afternoon with Slytherins and an evening with strategy.

She woke to a whirlpool above her.

Draco had a hand on her hair, brushing a curl off of her forehead. He kneeled next to the sofa, leaning over her. He wore a soft smile on his face, warm and glowing under the light of the single lamp he'd turned on. A lock of disheveled blond hair fell forward into his eyes.

At some point, the sun had set. His birthday already almost gone.

"Hi," Hermione said, staring up at him as her brain struggled out of

sleep.

“Hi,” he replied, smile growing. “Tired?”

She pushed herself up, capturing his hand in her own as it fell from her hair. She gave him a small tug, an invitation to sit with her. She might have been the one sleeping, but he looked wrecked by weariness.

“Have you been at your Gringotts meetings all evening? You look exhausted.”

They sat side by side, her left arm touching his right. He laced their fingers together and seemed to melt into the easiness of their touch. She melted too, coaxed by the comfort of it.

“I have. I am. It—didn’t go well. Not that I really expected anything else.” He looked at her, tired eyes searching hers. “Could I explain it another time? It’s complicated and I want to explain it right.”

She gave his hand a squeeze. He would tell her. And she would trust him to.

“Of course,” she said. “But you know, I have half a mind to be very upset with you, Draco Malfoy.”

His gaze snapped to hers and she immediately regretted her attempt at playfulness. The dread evident on his face nearly crushed her. She gave his hand another squeeze, a touch of reassurance.

“I have it on good authority that today is your birthday,” she said.

His groan was instantaneous. His head fell to the back of the sofa.

“Who was it?” he asked.

“Pansy. By way of Theo.”

Draco released a strangled sounding laugh, “Pansy? *Fuck.* In what world is Blaise Zabini my only loyal friend?”

Hermione leaned against his arm.

“She said I’m her best friend, you know.”

He chuckled, looking back at her. His annoyance had already faded.

“You two have different opinions on the definition of that term.”

“I certainly gathered as much,” Hermione agreed. Her head still felt foggy, weighed down by the day. She leaned further into him, sinking. He broke their hands apart to lift his arm, snaking it around her shoulders, pulling her closer. For a moment, Hermione let her eyes slip shut again, at ease in the comfort of his head against her curls.

“I was relieved you didn’t know it was my birthday,” he spoke quietly into her hair. She felt the press of what was probably a kiss against the crown of curls separating them.

“Why?” she asked, equally as quiet. “I understand if you don’t want to celebrate but I’d at least like to—I don’t know, acknowledge it?” Without his hand to hold, Hermione’s palm pressed against his thigh, her fingertips delivering tiny pulses of pressure as she spoke.

“I prefer ignoring it,” he said, still speaking to the top of her head, voice low. “I have—strained relationships in my life that make..." he trailed off. The pressure against Hermione’s hair increased. “It’s not the same day it used to be,” he concluded, voice almost lost in the bramble.

He didn’t know how to tell her. She could feel it. The muscles in his thigh tensed, his left hand against his other leg opened and closed, struggling for an equilibrium.

She sat up against him, still wrapped in his arm but pulling herself to see his face.

“Well,” she said. “In honor of your birthday that we’re not celebrating, and because I didn’t have time to get you a proper gift, I want to tell you something.”

“Do you?” he asked, a tired smile holding vigil on his features. She felt her curls twisting as he played with them absently.

“Even though I don’t have my memories—yet.” She struggled to amend her statement with that caveat of hope. “I realized I have a kind of feeling, not exactly a memory. But I do care, about you. I didn’t give myself enough credit to trust that if I’d picked you, it must have been for good reason.” She paused, the hand in her hair kept dancing through her curls, sending tiny jolts of pleasure buzzing through her scalp. She continued.

“You said you avoided some of the harder topics because if I just

remembered it would be easier. I think I was doing the same thing, in retrospect. I think I'd just hoped that if I remembered I wouldn't have to understand—because that was harder."

And now that the word *irreparable* had so thoroughly invaded her personal lexicon, Hermione nearly drowned in the fear that the harder option was the only one she had left.

But it was hard to stay submerged when Draco looked at her like she was the very center of his world.

"So—happy birthday?" she added weakly.

He leaned into her, the hand in her hair found its way to the side of her face, a firestorm of sensation against her skin.

"Fuck the schedule," he breathed. Hermione couldn't have agreed more.

She kissed him, pulling herself closer. Abandoning hesitation, she pivoted, pulling herself up and over, straddling his lap. The simple dress Pansy had picked, once respectably around knee-length, rode up, Draco's hand followed, kneading her flesh.

Hermione ran her hands through his hair, releasing a sigh against his mouth as his hands skimmed over her hips to find her waist, grappling at something carnal. Adrift against his lips, Hermione moved against him, desperate to draw out the undeniable pleasure found in his body against hers. His fingers traveled upward, touches on her ribs, etched against her bones. She panted, a rising tide of warmth flushing her.

She slowed, despite the wild hammering of her heart and pulses of desire shooting lower and lower with every delectable groan she wrung from his throat. They were rapidly approaching the boundaries they'd set, the timetables Hermione kept. And while sex didn't have a specific date in her schedule, this wasn't the night. Not on the back end of unspoken revelations and hurting on a day meant for celebration.

She pulled away, just enough to draw breath and break the spell of contact. She lingered close, still in his lap. She trailed her fingers along his face, the sharp angle of his jaw, his reddened lips. Her heart clenched as he leaned into her touch. It was a remarkable thing, what accepting Draco into her life had done to the rhythm of her heartbeat and the cadence of her breathing. Especially in moments like this where both stuttered in amazement of him.

“Did you want to sleep in your own bed tonight?” she asked, the words spilling from her lips before she even knew she’d thought them.

His eyes closed.

“No.”

She pulled further back, just enough to see the full picture of his face in front of her.

“What—no?”

“Trust me,” he said. “It’s not that I want to sleep on this sofa indefinitely. And I swear to you, I’m not pushing, not right now. But, the next time I sleep in that bed with you"—he leaned in, capturing her lips in another kiss, careful and measured as his hands cradled her face before he broke away again—“I intend to do far more than sleep. I don’t want any barriers.”

A rapid flush consumed her, caught somewhere between desire and despair. He kissed her again, briefly, as if to end the meandering trail of her thoughts.

“I’ve had far worse birthdays,” he told her. “Thank you.”

Hermione slid from his lap and let her head fall to rest on his shoulder. She fell asleep like that, curled against him on the great mystery of a green sofa, tormented by the barriers to memory inside her own head. She didn’t know how to mourn them, or how to share her grief.

Chapter End Notes

i love and appreciate kudos and comments if you feel so inclined to let me know what you think!! also, come hang out with me on tumblr, its a good time!

Chapter 7: Narcissa Malfoy

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"What is truly desirable? A possession that we cannot have. So, my life is devoted to seeing things that I cannot understand and obtaining things that are impossible to have. I succeed by two means: money and will."

— Alexandre Dumas, The Count of Monte Cristo

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July

Humidity and Hermione did not mix well. And this particular July seemed hell-bent on delivering humidity levels designed specifically to undo a lifetime of Hermione's careful self-acceptance as it related to the state of her hair. She hadn't been immune to the cruel comments lobbed at her in her youth about the bushy halo surrounding her head. And it bothered her how deep some of those comments cut. Because she was Hermione Granger, a brain with a body and the packaging shouldn't matter.

But of course, the packaging did matter. And not just to the people who made fun of it. It mattered to her too. Nowhere near as much as she imagined it mattered for someone like Pansy, but Hermione still appreciated the thrill of feeling beautiful, of feeling desired.

And when one lived in the same small flat as the object of one's desires, a persistent assault of humidity made feeling attractive a difficult task.

Most days, her usual routine could tame the frizz and force her curls into something manageable. This was not one of those days.

She let out a frustrated groan as she stared into the bathroom mirror, watching as her smoothing potion failed to restrain the small army of flyaway strands that fought for freedom atop her head.

“Everything alright in— oh.” Draco peered in beyond the door she’d left open. Another barrier broken down. With the opening of so many floodgates and the onslaught of a humid English summer, what had once been cool waters between her and Draco had warmed, sizzling liquid into steam.

“Don’t you dare laugh at me, Draco Malfoy.”

He paused mid-snicker, mirth still crinkling at the corners of his eyes.

“It’s not that bad,” he said, stepping towards her through the threshold of the tiny bathroom. “You should have seen it in Italy.”

Hermione sighed, trying to flatten the exceptionally wild strands fluffing out around her temples. The mention of Italy didn’t go unnoticed. Draco had started doing that, more and more, referencing parts of their life, the parts she didn’t remember, in a casual way. The spool of secrets he’d once kept so tightly wound had started to loosen, dropping threads everywhere.

But he’d already shared the day’s memories with her; the story of James Potter’s birth in the middle of 2004. And it had turned out to be quite the tale. Sentimental in that it was the moment Hermione became a godmother. Painful in that she still didn’t really *know* it. And overwhelming in that Draco revealed that’s when he knew he wanted a family of his own. A family with her.

So whatever Italy did or did not do to her hair could wait for another morning, whenever it fell on the list, along with the story of Christmas with the Malfoys. She’d grown quite adept at waiting to learn about her own past. She’d spent the last month waiting, hoping for the topic of disinheritance to come up. Not because she wanted to force Draco to relive what was clearly a difficult event in his life, but because the not knowing, the speculation running wild in her own mind, was slowly killing her.

The path towards the Christmas of 2004 had been a long one. And there were moments, so many moments, where the question begging to be asked nearly tumbled out of her. And sometimes she wondered if he could see the questions she had queued on the tip of her tongue as she fought her impulse to be direct and cut straight to the point. But the more she paid attention to Draco, to the care he took and the control he employed, the more she could see the difference between what she’d once thought was an evasive censorship and what was actually a near-crippling need to get it exactly right.

He stepped behind her, the taut surface of his chest just barely brushing against her shoulder blades, a rustle of fabric between them. Watching her in the mirror, he gathered her hair in his hands, letting his fingers trail along the column of her neck as he swept a collection of errant curls into his fist.

Hermione suppressed a shudder as tiny thrills raced along her pulse with every brush of his fingertips against her neck. He leaned close, mouth hovering beside her ear as the entire length of his body pressed against her back.

“Allow me,” he offered, breath hot against her ear. Hermione physically jerked, the muscles along her spine tensing rapidly as a shiver shot through her. The predatory smile he gave her in the mirror forced her to clutch the countertop.

But he’d already pulled back, twisting her hair at the nape of her neck and forming it into a messy, haphazard bun.

With only the smallest quake in her voice, Hermione appraised his work. “That’s no better than when I did it.”

For a moment, she almost thought he would surge forward again, wrapping his arms around her, peppering her neck and jaw with kisses. The fantasy was brief, but visceral. Instead, he leaned against the wall behind them and crossed his arms.

“No, it’s not. But I did get to do those lovely little things to your neck on a Sunday so I’m counting it as a success.”

Hermione fought a smirk, but it forced its way to her face regardless. She risked a quick glance at him in the mirror before she returned to the situation on her head. She tried half-heartedly to smooth down some of the frizz around her ears.

“Stop fighting it,” Draco said, watching her intently. “I think you look beautiful.”

“I think you’re biased,” Hermione replied, tucking another curl into the elastic holding everything together.

He pushed off the wall and closed the gap between them. His hand brushed against hers as he offered his assistance securing the wayward strand.

“I almost certainly am,” he admitted, hovering too close again.

She turned to face him, cramped in the small space.

“Did you want to come today?” Hermione asked suddenly. “I’m sure Harry and Ginny won’t mind. And I haven’t seen much of you this week.”

“I don’t know,” Draco started. “I think we saw quite a lot of each other last night.”

“Making out with me in the living room for so long that we miss our dinner reservation doesn’t count.”

“Perhaps we could agree to disagree?”

“You haven’t answered,” Hermione said. “Do you not want to come?” Self-consciousness flared in her veins, a sudden lambasting for her attempts at monopolizing his time.

“Oh,” Draco said, brows lifted. “I’m sorry, I thought it was obvious that I’ll go anywhere you ask me to. And since the Potter’s are expecting you momentarily, it’s a good thing I’m usually dressed to impress.”

He gave a casual gesture towards his trousers and tailored button-up: the Draco Malfoy uniform, as it were. Irritatingly, he wasn’t wrong. Where it took Hermione longer than she’d preferred to feel ready for a casual Sunday afternoon with her friends, Draco seemed simply to exist in a state prepared to entertain or be entertained.

He gave her a wink and took her hand in his. “It’s been a while since I’ve seen the weaslette anyway,” he said. “I’ve been itching to insult someone.”

“I don’t understand you two,” Hermione muttered with a shake of her head. She let him lead her towards the Floo.

He paused at the fireplace, Floo powder held awkwardly. He looked briefly at their joined hands.

“Should we just Floo together?” he asked, voice not entirely present. He didn’t quite look at her when he asked.

“Yes, let’s,” Hermione confirmed, bringing her other hand to grip his forearm. “Together.”

It was a word she’d never thought much about. Just a single word in

an expansive vocabulary. But seeing the effect it had on Draco's posture, on the quirk of a smile at the corner of his mouth, it quickly became a new favorite.

—

"Ah, Weasel," Draco greeted nearly as soon as they were through the Floo and inside Grimmauld Place. He gave the sitting room a stern evaluation. "Interesting how you can't buy taste with money or fame, isn't it?"

Ginny rolled her eyes and replied without missing a beat.

"Malfoy, I wasn't aware you were coming. Otherwise we'd have prepared a separate menu for your delicate palate. I hear you have a fondness for pub chips."

When Harry walked into the room his focus darted from Hermione to Draco, lingering on the point between them where she still held his hand. Even from behind the frames of his round glasses, Hermione saw his brow arched in his own evaluation.

Ginny opted for less subtlety, forcing herself between them and taking Hermione's arm in her own. "We were just grabbing the sandwiches and snacks, but when Harry and I get back, Hermione is ours. You can stay, Malfoy, but you can't have her. She's ours."

In the distance, Harry held his hands up in a gesture that said he wanted nothing to do with a custody agreement. Caught in the crossfire of semi-serious glares between Draco and Ginny, Hermione simply disentangled herself and picked a cozy chair for herself.

"That's perfectly fine with me," Draco said. "I'll just spend some time with the boys and let you three do your Gryffindor things."

"James and Albus are at The Burrow this afternoon," Harry said.

"Oh." Draco looked crestfallen for a moment. "In that case, it'll be a fight to the death for Granger, I'm afraid. And it may come as a shock, but I'm willing to fight dirty."

Ginny snorted, utterly unimpressed, and dragged Harry out of the

room, heading towards the kitchens, but not before shooting one last glance at Draco, a warning that Hermione had already been spoken for.

With a small laugh, Hermione sunk deeper into the extra-large armchair she'd selected, fully prepared for a relaxing afternoon. With a forlorn glance around the space, a slight sneer still in place as his gaze stumbled on particularly offensive pieces of decor, Draco joined Hermione at her chair and leaned down to whisper in her ear.

"You brought me here under false pretenses." The hiss in his voice sat squarely between annoyance and amusement.

She glanced up at him. Draco perched casually on the side of the chair, arms crossed, looking down at her with a smirk on his face.

"James and Albus aren't even here," he continued.

Hermione failed to suppress a giggle. "I never said they would be."

"It was implied," Draco concluded with a mock shake of his head. He slid into the seat, practically on top of her. "Make room," he insisted. The sudden contact with his person sent a flutter through Hermione's veins.

Hermione squeaked as she tried to shimmy to one side. As large as the armchair was, it was most certainly designed for a single occupant. Undeterred, Draco looped an arm around her middle and wedged himself beside and then beneath her, pulling her legs to rest sideways across his lap, her back pressed against the arm of the chair. Briefly, Hermione found herself grateful she'd decided on jeans and not a dress for this particular outing. She did not trust the upward trajectory of Draco's hands.

"There are other chairs in the room, you know," she told him with a look of practiced disapproval. She'd come to learn very quickly that if she gave him a taste, he'd devour the whole meal.

"I find I prefer this one," he said, a hand on her knee, the other still wrapped around her waist.

"I suppose I'll let you have it then," she started. She barely had to pretend to move before the arm around her waist tightened. He leaned into her neck, breath sending more shivers down her spine. Damn him.

“Well don’t do that. There’s plenty of room,” he said. And for a passing moment, she felt his lips press against her neck. Her schedule was in tatters, ripped to shreds by shrapnel. She couldn’t have recalled the day of the week in that moment even if she’d wanted to.

“Oh,” came Harry’s voice. Hermione looked up; he’d just entered the room with a towering plate of sandwiches in his hands. Ginny followed shortly behind. “We’re back at this, then?” he asked.

Hermione looked from Harry, who looked sadly resigned, to Draco, who looked supremely smug. She hopped out of the chair before Draco could stop her.

“No, we’re not. That was just—" She felt a blush creeping as she failed to explain away the position she’d been caught in.

Harry just shook his head and held the plate out towards Draco, who happily took one while the two men shared what could only be described as a *look*.

Hermione sank into the sofa opposite Draco and put on a fine show of not being affected by the smirk from Draco or the outright grin from Ginny. Harry was the only one who didn’t look particularly pleased, though his look was more that of an exhausted parent who’d once again just walked in on his teenagers engaged in something unsavory.

Ginny slid closer to her on the sofa, holding out an envelope in a suspicious shade of lavender.

“What’s this?” Hermione asked, taking the purple cardstock and examining the script on the front. Her eyes flicked to Draco. “It’s addressed to us,” she told him.

“We got one too,” Ginny said, snagging a sandwich of her own. She refused to elaborate further, using her food as a shield, taking three successive bites and offering Hermione an innocent shrug.

Hermione opened the envelope, head already heavy with speculation about the origins of a lavender scented, lavender hued stationary.

Quite unsurprisingly, it was an invitation from Lavender and Ron to the christening of their young daughter, Daisy. A pressed and dried daisy fell from the envelope with a sad, papery sort of flop.

Draco watched her, head tilted, waiting. Hermione sent the envelope and displaced flower floating towards him before she turned to Ginny,

brows lifted.

“Is Lavender even religious?” she asked, trying to recall if she’d ever heard of pureblooded witches and wizards engaging in any sort of non-pagan religion.

Ginny snorted into her drink. “I think Lavender believes in everything you can believe in.”

“And Ron…?” she trailed off in question.

“Loves his wife,” Draco supplied simply, surprising Hermione by having any input whatsoever. He’d made it evident on a variety of occasions that Ronald Weasley was not his favorite lunchtime conversation topic. Hermione wrinkled her nose, trying to sort through his logic. Draco just shrugged at her and sighed as if it were obvious. “Men are susceptible to all manner of persuasion and insanity where the women they love are concerned.”

Harry let out a laugh from his chair on the other side of the room. “Too fucking true, Malfoy.”

A pillow flew, soaring with perfect aim and velocity, and hit Harry solidly in the face, sending his glasses and sandwich scattering.

“And what is that supposed to mean, Harry James Potter?” Ginny asked in a perfectly calm tone as if she hadn’t just weaponized her sitting room decor.

Only once his glasses had been retrieved and returned to his face did Harry respond to his wife.

“We’re trying to have a third kid, Gin. We’re completely mental.”

“And I went to a Catholic Mass with your parents once,” Draco added, gesturing to Hermione.

Ginny gaped. “And you didn’t burst into flames? Isn’t that what’s supposed to happen?”

Draco didn’t seem especially concerned, he’d clearly survived unburnt, after all. Hermione smiled, strangely uplifted by the idea that he’d do something so simple as entertaining her parents’ loosely Catholic identity with her. She wondered what holiday that had been since that was the only time her parents typically indulged. Mentally, she added it to the list of stories she looked forward to learning.

The subject of disinheritance reared its head, reminding her of the unknown she desperately wanted to know. She felt her face tightening as she tried to force the thought away, remain neutral. She didn't want to ruin a perfectly pleasant afternoon with the powerful combination of her impatience and curiosity: unsated and growing ravenous.

Draco's persistent gaze caught her attention. He raised a brow at her and looked down at the envelope in his hand and then back up at her. His head cocked as if asking a silent question. Hermione's eyes drifted to the lavender envelope; she couldn't resist an indulgent eye roll.

Ginny and Harry had descended into a debate about how mad it was to want a third child. From what Hermione could pick out, it was a strange debate in which they didn't actually disagree: they both wanted a third. Though apparently, the merit of their collective insanity was a hot topic of discussion.

Draco lifted the envelope, eyes still connected with hers. He made a small nod forward, a pause, then a slight shake of his head. Then, with what looked like extreme amusement locked behind a smirk, he arched another brow at her: the question clear.

Did they want to attend?

Yes, of course. She wanted to support and celebrate with Ron. He was —important, still, to her life. Even if her interactions with him in the last six months had been limited to the dinner they did not speak of and a quick visit with Ginny and Harry right after Daisy was born (out of sync with the tea-leaves' predictions, no less).

But at the same time, she didn't *really* want to go. Ron had slipped out of her life in a silent sort of way that left little damage, surprisingly little, in fact. He left no shrapnel in his wake. No vacant caverns in her heart and mind. And Hermione didn't find herself wanting for more or less. Whatever equilibrium they'd found in their limited interactions worked well, even if the idea of it might have seemed sad and unbelievable to Hermione at a different time, in a different life.

However, they were not going to decline an invitation to a child's christening. Hermione would have thought some of Draco's pureblood propriety would have told him that.

She gave him a sharp look to say they would be attending, regardless of whether or not they wanted to. He only rolled his eyes at her and let the envelope fall to the table next to him, clearly displeased with

her response.

“Well, you two certainly seem more in sync,” Harry said. He looked reluctantly pleased by that fact. Beside Hermione, Ginny grinned again.

“We’re figuring it out,” Hermione admitted, watching Draco. Her words earned her one of his rare, genuine smiles. The kind without all the hard edges, every last trace of sneer, smirk, or snarl reduced to rubble by order of a dimple and the crinkle at the corner of his eyes.

It only lasted a moment, just long enough for Draco to realize that the Potters were watching him. He slipped back into a mask of cool collectedness. He cleared his throat, evidence of his discomfort under scrutiny. He stood, announced his need for the loo, and retreated from the room.

Harry took the opportunity to rise from his own seat and relocate himself on the other side of Hermione, effectively trapping her between both Potters: her best friends.

An unbidden image of Pansy Parkinson skated across her vision. Pansy Parkinson who had some very serious issues with boundaries. Pansy Parkinson who seemed genuinely glad to see Hermione again.

Harry shared a look with his wife over Hermione's shoulder.

“Can’t I?” Ginny asked her husband. “It’s not *that* intrusive a question.”

“If you ask, I want it known that I was the voice of reason.” Harry sighed.

“Ask me what exactly?”

“Are you two—you know—"

“I know?”

Harry groaned.

Ginny made a rather vulgar hand gesture, intimating sex.

This time Hermione groaned, letting her head fall back against the sofa.

“Merlin, Pansy Parkinson asked me the same question. No, we’re not.

Which means operation progeny or whatever we're calling it is on hold." She reached for a sandwich, shoving a huge bite in her mouth in hopes of escaping yet another conversation about her nonexistent sex life with her far too curious friends.

"Pansy Parkinson?" Harry asked at the same time Ginny screeched, "Were you trying to get pregnant?"

Through a bite of bread and deli meats, Hermione failed to answer either question successfully, her own confusion setting in.

"You didn't know?" she asked Ginny once she'd forcefully swallowed her panic sandwich.

"You're back with the Slytherin crew, then," Harry concluded quietly, partaking in his own, mostly one-sided conversation.

"I had no idea," Ginny said, eyes wide. She smiled. "But that's amazing!" Her face fell. "Well, I mean—"

"It's complicated now, obviously," Hermione said.

"Theodore Nott, too?" Harry asked, pensive.

"Don't be like that." Ginny warned from Hermione's other side.

"I'm not being like anything," Harry said. "Just reasonable caution. I'm an Auror, Gin. It's my job. I saw some of the stuff that came out of Nott Manor." He shifted his attention to Hermione. "It was some nasty business, that's all. I just want you to be safe. That's my only concern."

"I appreciate that, Harry," she told him, feeling a sinking disappointment at the sudden and unwanted confirmation that the Slytherin and Gryffindor sides of her life seemed quite firmly separate.

"Do you think Malfoy's gotten lost?" Ginny asked, thankfully diverting the subject.

"Has he been here much?" Hermione asked.

"Enough," from Harry.

Ginny gave her a nudge, "Go find him. We caught him being vulnerable so he's probably in crisis."

Harry snorted. “He did break my nose last time.”

—

Crisis wasn’t too far off. At least, Hermione assumed so when she found him staring at the Black Family Tapestry with a look of longing she couldn’t quite place. Whether it was longing to ignite the thing on fire or longing for his place in it; she wasn't sure he knew.

She paused in the doorway, watching as he stared at it, hands clenched at his sides. A muscle in his jaw twitched as his gaze tracked from one woven face to another, catching on the burned and blackened ones.

“You know, don’t you?” he asked, not looking at her, a heavy sigh in his tone. “You not asking a question is almost as obvious as you actually asking it.” It wasn’t an accusation, it almost sounded amused.

This was it, then.

“I know some,” she admitted. She took a small step closer to him. “You said you’d tell me, so I’ve been waiting.”

A lift at the corner of his mouth, just visible in profile, relaxed her. If Draco could still smirk then things couldn’t be too terrible.

“You’re not very good at being patient,” he said.

“Well,” she nearly huffed. “With a little effort, people can change.”

He didn’t acknowledge her words. But from the way his jaw flexed, he’d heard them loud and clear.

Draco reached out to trace his own name woven into the tapestry, his young face staring back at him. His was the newest addition on the tree left unmarred, relatively speaking, by the hate that governed such a prideful line of witches and wizards. He whispered something and a fire came to life at his fingertips, scorching the likeness.

Hermione watched as Draco’s woven portrait blackened and charred. Another whisper and the flames were gone, along with his depiction, now nothing but a name and a black hole to match the other wayward sheep of the Black family flock.

He turned back to her, his silver irises practically aflame with Draco's version of agony: seriousness.

"You were disinherited," Hermione finally said, unable to hold his stare.

He gave a curt nod and stepped closer to her. "I demanded it."

Hermione's face scrunched in confusion as she looked back at him. From how Pansy had worded it, Hermione hadn't expected that Draco had any choice in the matter, let alone that he might have requested such a thing.

"I don't regret it," he continued. "Not for a single moment."

"Your meeting with Gringotts last month?" she asked, finding herself another step closer to him.

He reached out first, fingers finding her forearms as he pulled her in, part hug, part grounding. She leaned into his chest, trying to siphon some of the pain she knew he carried, needing to help with that burden. She couldn't bear the thought of the weight that must be crushing him.

"I'm paying back my trust. Every Galleon I ever spent since I took possession of it at seventeen. I won't take or keep their money," he said against the top of her head. "Quite the opposite of embezzling from a trust, in fact."

Hermione couldn't help but release a soft giggle against his chest, a sound coated in the absurdity of the situation.

She leaned back enough to look up into his face. "How did it happen?"

Draco lifted a hand and smoothed more flyaway curls from her face, but Hermione felt the distinct moment his fingers trailed too close to her right brow, by the scar that lingered there.

"We moved in together not long after our first Christmas, the one with your parents." He paused, watching her face as she recalled the idea of that memory, one of many she only knew by words. "More accurately, you moved into my flat, which happened to be paid for by my trust. And was quite a bit larger than our space now. I know you've noticed—"

“How much stuff we have,” she supplied. She rested her head against his chest again, an exchange of comfort for strength. Who gave and who took made little difference. It was just another push and pull.

“My parents found out and they were—displeased. My father especially so. He was already resentful of the decommissioning process at the Manor, which you, of course, were leading.” Draco sighed, one hand splayed across her lower back, the pressure from his fingertips igniting tiny flames on her flesh through her jumper. “It was a tense year. We tried to spend Christmas with them, convince them—I don’t know, anything. To let us be happy, I suppose. I knew it would be a disaster. You were painfully optimistic.”

Even though she didn’t remember it, she knew the outcome from Pansy, and she couldn’t help but feel slightly deflated at having failed to make it a success.

“I normally enjoy being right,” Draco whispered. “To say it was an unmitigated disaster may be an understatement. My father didn’t much like inviting the woman gutting his home to Christmas dinner. My mother tried to play mediator, but she still has centuries of pureblood tradition complicating her position.”

“But she saved Harry,” Hermione said against Draco’s chest. “She did it to save you, to keep you safe. I don’t see how she could—"

Draco pulled them apart. His hands cradled her face, forcing her to look at him. They were so close they might kiss, in another context, a different conversation.

“There is a difference,” Draco began. “Between not wanting me dead and being willing to accept the end of two pureblood lineages. It’s something that can’t be undone. Once we start a family, Hermione, the Blacks and the Malfoys will never be pureblooded again.”

Hermione nearly forgot to breathe, staring up at him, trying to process the gravity of that statement. Of the idea that between them, just two people standing, ironically, in the Black family home, sat the potential to crumble the foundation of generations of fetid beliefs.

“They couldn’t accept it, even my mother, though I know she’s trying in her own way. My father tried to use the family money as a threat. I told him to keep every last fucking Knut. I wouldn’t have it.”

“And this?” Hermione asked, reaching up to place a finger on the scar above her eyebrow.

Draco's face contorted, a flash of horror overtaking it. Hermione realized he'd had no intention of bringing it up.

"I lost control of my magic," he said, voice strangled in his throat. "I was so furious with them, with all of it, that I—shattered every last piece of glass in that dining room. Goblets, windows, chandeliers, vases." He pulled her tight against his chest. She could practically feel the shame rolling off him. "You were magnificent, though," he added. "You immobilized all of it before I realized what I'd done. But not before—" Another attempt to smooth her flyaway curls, trailing too close to the scar.

"So it's not a cursed scar? Just glass? I could just heal it without the potion you invented?"

"You could, and I wish you would—" He grimaced, sucking in a breath through clenched teeth. "You would be upset if I didn't tell you," he started again, annoyance in his tone. "But you've said you won't vanish it, not unless I remove mine too." His left arm fell from his hold on her, his meaning clear: the Dark Mark.

"Apparently I can only earn your forgiveness once I've forgiven myself. Which is the most sentimental Gryffindor shite I've ever heard, by the way." His forced laugh sounded hollow in the small room. The breath he released, against her hair, felt more like a shudder.

"Could I say it?" he asked quietly. "Just once? Just for now?"

She had an idea of what he meant.

"It's a lot of pressure, you know," she said instead of answering him, fixating on the slightly pearlescent shirt button just beyond her nose. Even through the cotton fabric, his chest felt like fire against her cheek. "I mean, it's one thing to be married, and happy, and—" she broke off, clearing her throat. "But it's another thing to give up your family name, your ancestry, your money."

"I didn't even have to think about it." His grip on her tightened, fingers dancing along her spine.

"You can say it," she whispered into the fabric of his shirt. "I think I'd like to hear it."

She felt the moment he registered her words, because his chest shifted from a flat plain to something concave, shoulders pitched forward as he practically buckled. He stooped, his head finding refuge in the

crook of her neck, breath drifting across her skin.

“Gods I love you,” he said. “More than my name and more than my money, more than all of it.” His words ran like prisoners, held captive in his mind and mouth, just waiting for their moment to escape.

And she believed him. She could feel it. So much so that she finally noticed the quiet tears she shed, wetting his shirt. And as beautiful as it felt to be loved as Draco loved her, enough to give up everything, it would seem, she also ached, nearly collapsed, under the need to know how they got to that point. The want for her memories opened up an even greater hole inside her, swallowing shorelines and tainting everything with a torrent of loss.

Anxiety battered the chambers of her heart, stealing the potential joy of that moment and twisting it into something terrifying. She tried to breathe, to find balance on unsteady feet.

“Draco,” she said, feeling a hot, angry fear rising like bile in her throat. “I have to tell you something.”

The word *irreparable* tasted like stomach acid, incinerating her insides as she forced it out.

—

Draco went uncomfortably quiet, his heat retreating into cold, but not quite ice. He only asked her one question: when was her next appointment? She didn’t have the voice or the composure to answer him. He just beckoned her to join him in carrying out their social duties downstairs. He was perfectly polite, participating in conversation in an almost perfunctory manner before they bid their farewells to the Potters and returned to their flat.

Afternoon had turned to evening, but the summer sun still shined bright, forcing light into the darkest corners of Hermione’s fear and regret. She waited by the fireplace as Draco paced deep, purposeful strides from one cramped corner of the room to the other, mouth pressed into a hard line, and hands flexing at his sides.

He stopped, nostrils flaring through a particularly deep breath.

“I’ll be right back,” he said and disapparated then and there. Hermione blinked, still anchored to her spot near the fireplace, not entirely sure what was happening. She’d expected anger, devastation, or some difficult combination of the two. Instead, Draco seemed determined.

A minute later he apparated back into the flat carrying an armful of books. He set them down on a coffee table as Hermione glanced at the titles running along the spines. There were both magical and muggle books, all relating to memory and the mind. His own research, she realized.

He turned to face her suddenly; Hermione resisted the urge to flinch. “I’m sorry,” she started.

He lifted a hand to cut her off. “No—don’t apologize. Please.”

She nearly said something else, uttered a secondary apology before she realized he hadn’t finished.

“I’m not giving up. We’re not giving in,” he said, an almost uncomfortable measure of seriousness undercutting his tone. “I won’t give up until you want me to. It’s—your mind, your memories.” He sagged, the buoyancy of whatever flame had kept him afloat finally deflating. He looked dazed in his determination.

“I wish you’d told me sooner,” he concluded with a hard edge she saw him holding back. “I’d say we need to work on improving our communication but I feel like we’re doing our best, all things considered.”

Hermione tried to laugh but it came out as a sob. “I’m sorry,” she apologized anyway, a repetition of the same words she’d said before for lack of any other way to express it. “I promise I’m trying not to lose hope.”

Instead of rushing to her and offering support as she crumpled, Draco stepped away, taking a few huge strides towards the kitchen. He returned barely a moment later, one of his personal stash of candies in his hand. He held it up to her, a curious look on his face.

“Here,” he said. “Hope. This is proof it can exist even when it shouldn’t.”

Hermione’s tide of panic and grief ebbed in her confusion.

“Because of a sweet you won’t share?”

“My mother used to send these to me every year on my birthday.” The corner of his mouth twitched with a hint of fondness. “They were the best part of the end of term exams.”

Hermione plucked the candy from his fingers. It didn’t look like a particularly magical variety, just a soft taffy that if her parents hadn’t been dentists might easily have sat on the kitchen counter in her muggle home. She lifted it to her nose; it smelled faintly of sour apple.

“She stopped sending them after that Christmas, after the disinheritance. My birthday that first year was..." He trailed off.

Hermione pulled at the twisted ends of the paper wrapper, freeing the light green taffy.

“She stopped sending them,” Hermione repeated, trying to understand the implication of hope she was meant to find.

“She stopped sending them to me on my birthday,” he said, taking a step closer to her. He took the candy from her fingers, the paper wrapper already forgotten, fluttering somewhere to the ground. Hermione parted her lips, seeing his intent as he slipped the candy into her mouth, fingers pausing for a moment too long on her lips. “They arrive on your birthday instead.”

Hermione closed her eyes, the significance of such a thing too much to process in tandem with any sort of visual input. When she opened them again, Draco had stepped back to allow her space. He had his hands in his trouser pockets, watching. He gave a small shrug.

“I won’t give up until you tell me to,” he said. “Besides, you wouldn’t do nearly as much research as you do if you truly believed the damage was irreparable. And I’ve been researching, too.” He gestured to the books behind him. “We’ll do this together.”

Together. It was a much better word than irreparable.

“My July appointment is on Friday,” she said.

He gave a sharp, determined nod. “I’ll be there.”

—

With Draco holding her hand, Hermione didn't pick at her cuticles under the bright lights of the examination room. Instead, she focused on the tiny comforting squeezes he offered, the idle patterns his thumb traced against her palm, and the fire of his skin against her own.

"There doesn't appear to be any physical change inside the brain," Healer Lucas said: her month to deliver the same refrain.

Draco's grip on Hermione's hand tightened. From her periphery, she saw him nod to acknowledge the information, a flash of his white-blond hair dipping in and out of view.

"And the alternate theories?" Hermione prompted, squeezing back. Draco had promised that his presence would be one of support only, but she could already feel the rising tension in the set of his posture and the drag of his adam's apple down the line of his throat. At this point, she knew him well enough to know how he looked when he restrained himself, even when such a look might only register as extreme composure to an outside perspective.

She saw the flames simmering beneath the surface.

Jenkins cleared his throat. Since their last appointment, he'd had his sandy hair cut, but too short this time. It drew attention to the angular shape of his head and made him look unusual in an unsettling way. It was a far cry from the unkempt, innately trustworthy look he once had.

Distantly, Hermione wondered how much of her own anxiety colored that picture of him.

"Since June, I've been researching potential potion compositions that, when exposed to physical trauma, might behave in a targeted manner within the brain like we've seen in your case."

As Jenkins spoke, his voice trailed quieter and quieter. Hermione angled herself slightly so she could better see Draco's face. His nostrils had flared and his slow, steady breathing had a damning quality to it that clearly rattled the healer's confidence.

"Why potions?" Draco asked, words dragging through nearly clenched teeth.

Hermione gave his hand another squeeze, an effort at ease via osmosis.

Jenkins cleared his throat again. His gaze flicked to Draco before immediately landing back on Hermione. He spoke only to her, whether by professional intent or self-preservation, it was unclear.

“As you live in close contact with a potions master, it was a logical avenue to pursue.” Again, his voice trailed into nearly nothing.

Draco’s grip on Hermione’s hand turned painful. Hermione could feel him fighting not to snap at the unspoken implication of culpability.

Healer Lucas spoke up, offering Jenkins a reprieve from Draco’s glare. She seemed much less bothered by his slow simmering ire, but still spoke mainly to Hermione.

“It’s extremely common in households that regularly brew untested or unusual potions for unintentional exposure to occur—"

A knuckle in Hermione’s right hand popped from the pressure of Draco’s grip. He immediately pulled his hand away, looking horrified. It hadn’t hurt, but it certainly surprised her. From the look on his face, he’d had no idea he’d been squeezing so hard.

She looked at him, the mercury in his eyes had gone molten. He needed control.

“Do you need to occlude?” she asked quietly, trying to give him a small smile of encouragement.

For a moment, he looked stricken, the suggestion clearly knocking his carefully collapsing equilibrium off balance. But Hermione didn’t mean the offer as an insult, or to wound, or as a blow meant to trudge up the complicated relationship they had with that particular skill set of his. No, she simply meant to suggest it as a practical tool he could use, if he needed it, to manage what was clearly a growing temper in a professional setting.

Honestly, she should have expected it. Draco Malfoy could typically be relied upon as a composed, even-keeled wizard. Except where she was concerned, evidently. There was the matter of Harry’s broken nose, after all.

He looked at her for a second longer, as if searching for anger of her own, or resentment. But she had none. She was too preoccupied with

keeping thoughts of irreparable memory loss at bay; she had no room to judge him for his own fears as well.

The mercury cooled, shifting states of matter, colder and colder until something solid formed. But the shards he normally flaked and discarded remained in place, just tightly controlled. He reached for her hand again, a steady pressure.

That pressure anchored her for the rest of the appointment. It provided a point of reference for her focus through the forced confidences and empty reassurances. It became a tiny plot of dry land where she could stake her hope, minuscule as it may be. They could protect it there, together.

The moment they left the examination room he brought his Occlumency crashing down in a single blink and a heavy sigh: ice melting.

“Thank you for coming with me today,” she told him, knowing how difficult it had been. She’d never allowed him in the room before, never put him face to face with such dwindling prospects of recovery.

“I probably could have handled myself better,” he said in an obligatory way.

Hermione laughed. At least he’d admitted as much, sincere or not. “It’s Friday,” she said.

“It is.”

“Would you like to visit Nott Manor tonight?” she asked.

His brows lifted.

“Are you sure?” he asked. “The last time we tried returning to our normal social habits I almost had to murder Ronald Weasley in a restaurant.”

She smiled, the memory of that terrible evening now felt distant and painless, healed without a scar. “I’m sure.”

—

“Is that seriously what you’re wearing?” was Pansy’s greeting as Hermione stepped out of the Floo at Nott Manor, hand in hand with Draco. “Are you doing this to me on purpose?” Pansy continued, narrowing her eyes with suspicion.

“It’s nice to see you again as well, Pansy,” Hermione said.

“I know you have plenty of other options in your closet,” Pansy said, sidestepping any normal version of social niceties.

“It’s been a long day.”

Pansy just rolled her eyes and pulled Hermione out of Draco’s grasp. Draco, for his part, looked almost conspiratorial as he watched them interact. Hermione tried to place it, the look on his face as if he couldn’t decide between fond amusement and a serviceable level of concern. Amusement won out.

“Look who finally fucking showed up,” Pansy announced as she dragged Hermione into a cavernous room she couldn’t even begin to fathom the original purpose of. Presently, the enormous space contained a singular round table and its accompanying chairs. The stone walls, tiled floors, and empty spaces made the entire room feel eery and sterile. The only suggestion of life came from the litany of liquor bottles scattered across the enormous table.

Theo hopped up and grabbed a bottle. “About time Granger. Have a drink, have a seat, and let’s have some fun.” He thrust the bottle of fire whiskey into her hands.

“I don’t get a glass?” she asked.

Theo shared an exaggerated look with Pansy, heaving a huge sigh. “Gryffindors,” he complained with a shake of his head.

Theo led her to the seat next to Blaise, who leaned precariously back in his chair, two legs off the ground, and looking like a deep breath might send him toppling. Hermione suspected magic might be involved in the impressive balancing act. The smoke from his cigarette twisted and swirled into the air next to him.

Hermione realized she’d still yet to actually speak to Blaise Zabini in her new life.

“No upholstery to ruin in this room?” she asked him with a wry smirk, her best impression of Draco.

Theo answered as he took the seat on Hermione's other side. "No rugs, tapestries, or upholsteries in this room. It's impervious to the nouveau-riche." He looked far too pleased with himself.

Pansy slid a glass towards Hermione from across the table, which Blaise intercepted and filled for her.

"You know, you were all my friends first," Draco said, taking a seat and sounding slightly wounded.

"Yes and your novelty has worn off," Blaise replied, handing Hermione the glass of fire whiskey. "Down the hatch, Granger."

Blaise began dealing cards around the table. Pansy slid gambling chips in Hermione's direction. No one appeared interested in explaining the game or the rules to her, still caught up in the momentum of her arrival.

"Plus, I've been waiting since January to hear how the story of this wall in Germany ends," Theo added, clinking his own glass with Hermione's.

Hermione eyed the cards and chips in front of her. The people around the table only seemed passively interested in them. She knocked back her drink and did her best to resist scrunching her face at the burn down the back of her throat.

Pansy groaned. "We don't need any history lessons tonight, Theo. I'd rather have fun."

Blaise had already refilled Hermione's drink by the time she turned to Theo for clarification.

"Wall in Germany?" she asked. "As in the Berlin wall?"

Theo clapped his hands together. "Yes, that's the one!"

Draco shared a brief eye roll with Pansy before his gaze landed on Hermione. Tucked behind his amusement, and partially obscured by the glass he held near his mouth, Hermione saw him relaxing, unwinding in a way he rarely did. He looked so much younger, bickering with Pansy, sipping his drink, and sneaking glances at her so unabashedly loaded with desire that she had to intentionally look elsewhere.

"So Granger, what's the story on the wall?" Theo prompted as he

reached across her to push Blaise's heels off the tabletop where he'd recently propped them up. Draco looked at his cards and tossed a Sickle chip into the center of the table, clinking off a champagne bottle.

"Oh," Hermione started. "They tore it down."

"What?" Pansy nearly shouted, smacking a hand on the table before she cleared her throat and regained some of her composure. She twisted, reaching into the bag hanging off the back of her chair. She pulled out a Galleon and tossed it to Blaise.

He caught the coin with little effort, still balanced on two legs of his chair. He lifted his brows in an expression that said: *wasn't it obvious?*

"So what is it we normally do at these things?" Hermione asked, still unclear on the nature of the card game. "Is this who's usually here? What about the other people from your house? Wasn't there Millicent Bulstrode? And Daphne Greengrass? Gregory Goyle? And—" Hermione struggled to remember anyone else from their year.

Draco laughed. "Millicent Bulstrode? Merlin, I forgot she existed."

Hermione bristled, a memory from her second-year surfacing. "You know, we got into a fight and she put me in a headlock once. I also accidentally polyjuiced myself into her cat," she said stiffly.

Theo did an actual spit take with his whiskey across the table. Pansy dropped her glass, spilling the contents of her drink. Blaise leaned forward, slamming the two suspended legs of his chair back to the floor. Draco simply arched an eyebrow at her.

"Details, now," Pansy demanded. Theo nodded in agreement and even Blaise looked fascinated with his head cocked to the side. Pansy pivoted. "Did you know about this?" she accused Draco by way of question.

"Polyjuice, yes. Headlock, no. But I'm eager to learn," he said, narrowing his eyes at Hermione. Her breath felt heavy, eyes locked with his. This was the first moment in her recent memory that she could recall knowing something about her past that he did not. Their entire information dynamic shifted and suddenly, finally, she had some of the power.

There was something heady and intoxicating, more so than the alcohol, about the way Draco looked at her, expectant for a story. Not

the other way around. It was a simple, small thing, but it felt like agency, like ownership of her own life and mind again. She loved it. Was this what life without the blank spaces in her head could look like?

And after all that; they didn't believe her. Or rather, they couldn't seem to agree on which part of the story was least believable.

"There's no way *you* would have ever gotten into a fight," Theo insisted.

"Do you not remember when she slapped me?" Draco asked.

"What you do in the bedroom is your business," Theo quipped with a salacious wag of his brow.

Draco threw a Galleon chip at Theo's head. Despite the violent response, Theo smiled. Blaise chuckled from beside Hermione and even Pansy looked like she might be reluctantly enjoying herself. Hermione took another deep sip of her drink, making eye contact with Pansy. Hermione placed a bet, only half sure she was even doing it right since no one had actually explained the rules to her.

Draco and Theo continued to squabble, something about the 2006 Quidditch World Cup and Burkina Faso. The volume in the room had pitched upward, growing more and more raucous with each drink Blaise poured, their ever diligent bartender. Pansy helped herself to a spear of green olives from the center of the table. Blaise tipped back in his chair again.

Blaise leaned closer to her, precariously balanced, beckoning her with a low voice and a knowing smirk. "Get ready."

"Ready for what?" she asked as Theo and Draco drew their wands. They'd both risen, stepping away from the table, circling.

"You know this is pointless, right Theo?" Draco half-laughed, half-shouted. "I'm a much better duelist," Draco added, looking smug and fighting a wide smile.

Theo laughed. "The only person in this room I know could beat me without even trying is Granger. You're out of practice, you brew potions all day and you haven't been here in *months."*

Hermione leaned over towards Blaise. "Is this a Slytherin thing?"

Blaise took a drag from his cigarette, careful to exhale the smoke away from her. “You don’t see me posturing over there, do you?”

“True.”

Draco chucked his cufflinks onto the table, already deep into the process of rolling up his shirt sleeves. Hermione couldn't help but watch, enraptured, realizing far too late the snare she’d been trapped in.

“Close your mouth, Granger. It’s undignified,” Pansy ordered from across the table.

Hermione’s mouth snapped shut.

Pansy gestured to the small pile of chips in the center of the table. “Does anyone even know whose turn it is?”

“Not a clue,” Blaise said.

A rapid series of flashes and cracks drew Hermione’s attention back towards Draco and Theo, or rather, what remained of them. Theo lay flat on the floor sporting what looked like an incredibly painful sunburn and Draco’s right hand was bleeding from a huge gash running from his thumb to his wrist.

And they were both laughing.

Hermione was already on her feet, muttering a counter curse to Theo’s burns and then turning her attention to Draco, who smirked in her direction and didn’t look the least bit concerned.

“I won,” he told her with pride as she approached, whispering her best healing spell through the wobble of alcohol she’d consumed. He stopped bleeding, flesh knitting together enough for the time being. She’d probably need to revisit her work when she sobered. But at the moment, Draco was staring down at her with dark eyes and a smug expression, sucking all the air from the room around them.

“Drinking and dueling?” she asked, a hint of her amusement bleeding through. They were ridiculous, the lot of them.

He hummed, either in agreement or approval. He ran a finger down her forearm, setting wildfires in his wake, before he laced his fingers between her own.

“Let’s take a walk,” he said, ducking close to her and whispering the words in her ear.

“Why?”

“Because I want to be alone with you.”

It was a pretty good reason.

—

“Theo has a ballroom at his house?” Hermione asked Draco, feeling warm and pleasant and only a little bit hazy from her imbibing.

A chorus of laughter from down the hall indicated that the festivities between the Slytherins had gone on without them.

“Of course there’s a ballroom. It could hardly be a proper manor without one,” Draco replied, slipping a hand around her waist. “Dance with me, wife,” he breathed into her hair.

The beat her heart skipped felt like it lasted a lifetime.

“In an empty ballroom with no music?” she asked, but he’d already started leading, an uncomplicated series of steps. Steps she knew without knowing them. Like holding James for the first time, some things seemed threaded into the weave of her muscles: reflex, not memory.

Nearly everything about Draco had become reflex, separate from the lack of memory.

“This is fun,” Hermione admitted in simple terms, alcohol stealing some of her vocabulary. “Your friends are fun.”

“I’m aware,” he said. The smirk was implied somewhere beyond her field of view, which had narrowed to his shoulder and chest.

“It’s different than when we’re with my friends,” she continued. The admission was there, too. It was more relaxed, and in a way, more fun.

Draco made a noise of agreement. “Your friends accept me because

they love you. My friends accept you because they love you, too." He laughed, the rumble of it vibrating through his chest. "And that's certainly not how I expected things to play out, considering the pureblood mania my friends are so intimately familiar with."

"You changed," she said, as an example.

"You changed me."

"And they changed."

"You changed them, too."

"Seems like you're giving me a lot of credit," she said, barely managing her thoughts beyond the steps of their dance and the heat crawling through her arms and waist where he held her.

"It's not possible to give you too much credit," he said, serious through the alcohol. Hermione smiled against his chest, content.

He pulled away, just enough to lift an arm and guide her into a quick spin. She laughed, feeling the echo of a memory she'd learned. When they came back together, he leaned down, forehead against hers, eyes closed.

"Draco?" she whispered, her tongue loosened by liquor. "I think we might get through this."

He didn't open his eyes, he just made another satisfied humming noise, a hint of cinnamon from the firewhisky drifting from his breath.

"I think so, too," he said after a pause, holding her close as they burned a trail around the ballroom.

Chapter End Notes

i love and appreciate kudos and comments if you feel so inclined to let me know what you think!! also, come hang out with me on tumblr, its a good time!

art inspired by this chapter:
Draco Burns the Tapestry by Avendell

Chapter 8: George Weasley

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I don't think man was meant to attain happiness so easily. Happiness is like those palaces in fairy tales whose gates are guarded by dragons: we must fight in order to conquer it."

— Alexandre Dumas, The Count of Monte Cristo

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August

Of all the ways Hermione might have imagined spending her Saturday morning with a mild hangover, allowing Pansy Parkinson carte blanche over her outfit for James's birthday party was not the first thing Hermione expected. But allegedly Hermione had *promised,* never mind that she didn't entirely recall the details of that conversation beyond the blur of whatever delicious mixed drinks Blaise served the night before. In the four successive Fridays since Hermione and Draco first returned to the social circuit at Nott Manor, Pansy bemoaned Hermione's wardrobe choices at every single occasion, and a three year old's birthday had apparently become her moment for redemption.

Which was how, in preparation for said party, Hermione found herself wedged in her closet with Pansy near to bursting with glee as she rifled through Hermione's clothes.

"Indoor event, correct?" Pansy asked amidst a ruthless assessment of her options.

"Yes, it'll just be at Harry's," Hermione said. She leaned against the door jamb, preparing herself for a lengthy selection process.

"Ah, that decrepit old townhouse that should have gone to Draco?"

Out of Pansy's line of sight, Hermione lifted her hands, tensed, and then let them fall in a show of exasperation sinking into acceptance.

“I sometimes wonder if you’re trying to get a rise out of me. I’m sure you’re aware that Sirius had every right to will the property to Harry,” Hermione said, settling on civility.

Pansy made a thoughtful noise between outfits. “But you’re so much fun when you’re wound up,” was all she admitted.

Pansy pulled something from between the cramped hangers and shoved it into Hermione’s arms.

“What’s this?” Hermione asked, once again surprised by a piece she’d never seen before.

“It’s a green linen palazzo pant, obviously,” Pansy answered breezily as she returned to her search. A moment later she dropped a black silk button up on top of the monstrosity of green fabric.

“Pansy, this is hideous.”

“It is not; you love these pants. They’re perfect for August. Plus you’ll be inside so you don’t need to prepare *too* much for the weather.”

Hermione considered the color palette presented to her.

“You’re dressing me in Slytherin colors on purpose, aren’t you?”

“You have to learn somehow. Just compromise with me, Granger. The pants have elastic in the waistband. Honestly, it's generous of me to allow it.”

“Says the woman I’m letting choose my outfit.”

Pansy laughed “I picked most of this out with you. I’m an invested party in this venture.”

Without allowing for any more discussion, Pansy pulled Hermione out of the closet and to the dresser. She opened the lingerie drawer Hermione had successfully avoided for over six months.

“You’re wearing one of these today,” Pansy announced, a hand under her chin as she considered the options before her.

“I don’t recall asking for assistance with my undergarments.”

“And yet, I’m about to burn up in all this sexual tension between you and Draco.”

Hermione's mouth dropped open, struggling for a response.

"Granger, I'm not saying you have to put these to use today, but it probably wouldn't hurt to be prepared," Pansy said as she pulled a matching black set from the drawer: a little bit lacy and relatively reasonable, all things considered. "Just go with these. And leave the third button of the blouse undone, he'll catch a glimpse if he's standing close. Convenience of being so tall." It was almost impressively clinical how Pansy could strategize such a thing. Hermione had a momentary sensation like she'd parted from her body, watching such a strange scene unfold as someone else entirely.

Pansy slid the drawer closed and motioned for Hermione to change with a wave of her hand in the direction of the closet. When Hermione didn't move, still a bit dumbfounded, Pansy drummed her blood-red nails against the top of the dresser in an impatient cadence.

"What?" Pansy started. "Do you *not* want to give him a peek?"

Hermione had no answer for that. Because if she really thought about it, the answer was likely a reluctant yes. She wasn't exactly opposed to a bit of escalation. With resolve, Hermione marched to the closet and changed. Pansy Parkinson had a point, and Hermione found that quite annoying.

When she emerged again, fully changed, Pansy sat quietly, perched at the edge of the bed, a brow raised.

There was a beat of silence before Hermione rolled her eyes and caved.

"Fine, I like the pants," she admitted.

"Knickers aren't so bad either, right?"

"I'm not answering that."

Pansy grinned regardless, clapping her hands together and standing. "My work here is done."

Hermione appraised her appearance in the dresser mirror. Despite the obviously green and black color scheme, she didn't feel patently ridiculous or like a Slytherin mascot. The fact that the pants leaned more olive than emerald certainly helped.

"If you're looking for jewelry to wear, there's a ring in Draco's bedside

table you might be interested in," Pansy commented offhandedly.

Hermione's gaze whipped to Pansy's reflection in the mirror. Pansy didn't look at her. Instead, she examined her obviously perfect nails with intense curiosity.

"What did you just say?" Hermione asked, trying her best to control the riot of different reactions vying for priority in the forefront of her brain. Disbelief won out.

"I realize I crossed some boundaries. I'm—I apologize, alright? I actually feel pretty guilty about it, which if you remembered anything from the last few years you'd know is *very* unusual for me but—"

"Gods Pansy, what did you do?"

"Well, I didn't just sit at your kitchen table and stare at your cat when Theo broke me in a couple of months ago, did I?" Pansy snapped, finally looking up from her nails.

Hermione turned away from the mirror so that she could look at Pansy directly.

"I might have done a little snooping," Pansy admitted with an eye roll as if it were someone else admitting to such a flippant violation of privacy.

Hermione's face must have flushed as red as her vision felt, a hot pulse of irritation radiating from her chest. Pansy clearly noticed because she jumped up and approached Hermione, her face as close to contrition as Hermione had ever seen.

"It's just—" Pansy tried with a false start. "It was rather unbelievable, what they said happened to you and I just, I had to know. So I did some snooping and I found your ring, which was odd enough, but then I put it on and wore it the whole time we talked and you—you didn't even notice. Well, it looked like you might have noticed for a second, but you didn't say anything and"—Pansy let out an enormous breath—"you haven't worn it since and I realized there must be a *thing* going on that I don't understand and—I genuinely feel bad about it Granger, alright? And I know you already don't really believe we're friends and I—well, you told me once you appreciate honesty so I'm trying it, ok?"

Hermione lost her train of thought partway through Pansy's confession turned apology turned something else entirely. She couldn't

get a gauge on how she felt, only that there was something unsteady in the openly uncomfortable look on Pansy's face.

"Let me summarize what I think I just heard," Hermione began, needing a breath and a moment to collect herself. "You broke into my flat, looked through my stuff, wore my wedding ring as some kind of test to the veracity of my memory loss, felt guilty about it, and are now—what? Asking for forgiveness?"

Pansy's let out a relieved sigh. "Oh good, glad we have that settled."

"I haven't said I've forgiven you."

Pansy froze, eyes wide. In a flash, gone almost before Hermione could catch it, she saw genuine fear, honest regret, and something unnervingly like sadness cross Pansy's face. She wrung her hands together, just once, before she forced her arms to her sides.

Hermione couldn't exactly explain it, maybe it was another echo or the wrenching of a reflex, but seeing Pansy so genuinely concerned kept Hermione from calling upon true anger. Irritation, certainly. But she wasn't mad. Begrudgingly, she almost felt bad for Pansy, which was a surreal sort of feeling to experience under the circumstances. So instead of spending her energy on anger, Hermione pulled Pansy in for a brief hug.

"I believe you," Hermione said as Pansy stiffened in her arms.

"Which part?" Pansy asked as she pulled away, smoothing away nonexistent wrinkles in her blouse. "The part about us being friends or the part where I'm—you know, apologizing?"

Watching Pansy struggle to admit she was trying to apologize was enough of a reason to forgive her, if Hermione was honest with herself.

"Both," Hermione admitted. "I accept your apology. But Merlin, Pansy. *Boundaries."*

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With very little additional fanfare apart from Hermione's insistence

that she would not be looking at the ring without speaking to Draco, Pansy let herself out of the bedroom and down the hall, presumably towards the Floo. Hermione caught the tail end of Pansy's goodbye to Draco.

"Enjoy the view today," Pansy said with far more excitement than the sentiment warranted without context. On the heels of briefly wanting to throttle Pansy, Hermione decided the Slytherin had the same sorts of qualities Theo did: infuriating and annoyingly likable in a unique way.

Hermione took a moment to double-check the time of James's party in her planner. Despite Pansy's unexpected confession, her styling session didn't take nearly as long as Hermione had expected. Pleased, Hermione returned the notebook to her bedside drawer, next to the cell phone she'd let die months ago. Now that she had a standing lunch scheduled with her parents once a month, she didn't need the technology. Instead, she had her parents back.

It was an odd thing, the tentative raw edge of progress. Normalcy felt like redundant muggle technology and an extra button on her blouse left undone: simple things slowly filling up her empty spaces with the echoes of old memories and the creation of new ones.

She found Draco sitting on the velvet sofa, dressed impeccably in dark trousers and a light gray button-up he had rolled to the elbows. He'd let his pale hair grow out even more in the recent months, swept back dramatically and lending a regal air to his appearance. He had his readers on as he craned over the book in his lap. Between his obvious intelligence and his overall physical presence, Hermione wasn't exactly disappointed that Pansy had forced her into pretty little laced undergarments.

He glanced over the top of his glasses as Hermione approached.

"Pansy seemed like she was in a good mood," he commented.

"She's put me in Slytherin colors, as you can see."

"You look lovely," he said, closing his book.

"We also had a bit of a *moment* together," Hermione added without the means to better describe it.

Draco chuckled, setting his book aside. "I hope you didn't hurt yourselves."

Hermione just rolled her eyes and took the opportunity to glance down at the title he'd been reading: *Magical Maladies of the Mind, sixth edition.*

"Anything?" she asked, referencing the book.

Draco pulled the glasses from his face with a small, disappointed breath.

"Nothing," he said. "I've been looking into potential potions connections since that's what the professionals think is likely." He sneered through his use of the word *professional.* An image of an intimidated Jenkins flashed in front of Hermione's vision. "But it's not going anywhere," he admitted.

Hermione sat next to him. Quietly, she gave voice to a growing fear.

"What if it's something else? And we haven't even considered it?"

Draco didn't bother masking his own concern. He simply reached out and pulled her close, hands finding purchase in her mass of curls, twisting and twirling with idle fascination as he offered passive comfort.

Hermione's mouth fell to a frown, letting her head rest against his shoulder.

"You know," she started. "The closest I come to remembering is with you."

Without looking at him, she could feel the self-satisfied grin spreading across his face.

"Is that so?" he asked in an understated attempt at soliciting more information despite his smugness.

She risked a glance up at him. "Don't let it go to your head. I'm just trying to be honest. You know, communicate."

He kept smiling. The hand winding through her hair found its way to the base of her neck. In an obviously practiced movement, his thumb and forefinger dragged along the muscles on either side of her spine, unwinding a tense weave in her neck and sending small internal flames blooming outward.

Embarrassingly, her eyes rolled backwards without her consent, a tiny

moan of approval clawing its way from the base of her throat. Draco chuckled, but it was a dark noise, devoid of the things one does in the light.

“Things like this,” Hermione said, rolling her shoulders just enough to indicate she referenced the magnificent things his potioneer’s hands were doing to her nervous and musculature systems. “Not memories. But echoes. Or reflexes. You’ve—" a shudder rolled through her spinal column. “You’ve touched me like this before.”

She had no voice left for her words, only air carried on unsteady breath. She thought she might get used to the way he touched her, to the fires he set with his skin and the ashen absence when they were apart. But even now, months from their initial blaze, set while pressed against the door to their flat, she craved his acts of arson more and more.

Draco spoke against the side of her neck, a distance he’d closed without her knowing it.

“I have,” he said. The momentary drag of his teeth against her flesh nearly hijacked Hermione’s entire ability to breathe, respiration held hostage by a violent thrum of anticipation. His lips replaced teeth, pressing fleeting, featherlight kisses up the vertical length of her neck and towards the junction beneath her ear.

“It’s Saturday,” she faintly registered him saying. “James is stealing my Saturday with you.” The brush of his tongue beneath her jaw forced her to reach out, a hand finding his solid leg, bunching the fabric of his trousers in her fist.

“You couldn’t actually be upset with him,” she said, leaning into his touch, brain practically short-circuiting with every jolt of electricity from his lips or tongue or teeth. “You love him.”

“True,” he conceded to her pulse point.

“We are running slightly ahead of schedule though,” Hermione managed through a haze. “We have a few minutes to spare,” she continued, stoking the flames higher.

He stopped moving, lips lifted from the places on her neck that craved more touch.

“Only a few minutes?” he asked, just close enough that his lips barely brushed against her as he spoke.

“Just a few,” she confirmed with a sigh torn between pleasure and disappointment.

Only the tiniest squeeze from his hand at the base of her neck gave away his intentions. He tipped them, lowering Hermione’s back against the sofa, the delicious feeling of his weight sinking against her. “I’ll have to make it worth your while,” he breathed, finally detached from his work against her neck.

She had no time for a pithy response, not that she had much capacity to conjure one, as he stole the words from her lips with his mouth. She couldn’t resist the impulse to arch against him, the need for closer contact prickling at her pores. Distantly, she tried to recall if she’d remembered to leave that third button undone, per Pansy’s orders.

But she decided it didn’t much matter when Draco groaned against her mouth regardless. It was a desperate, needy sound wrought from the vacuum between them and the sudden absence of air in the room. But somehow, even without any spare oxygen to burn, the flames still grew.

Hermione ran a hand along his jaw, smooth and freshly shaven, before threading her fingers through the hair at the back of his head. She’d learned she could make him shudder with a well placed drag of her nails through his scalp, and ever an example of academic excellence, she relished in every opportunity to put her knowledge to the test.

But instead of a shudder, he rolled against her, a flint and steel of friction striking sparks to her very core. She pulled him tighter, desperate to memorize the taste of his mouth and the shape of the small sighs he breathed straight to her lungs.

Hermione could spend hours with her mouth against his, operating purely on reflex and allowing her brain to quiet just long enough for the push and pull between fear and hope to fade into something distant and inconsequential. In a matter of fact, she had spent hours doing just that: tasting him, touching him, stepping closer and closer each time to a ledge of intimacy she knew she’d tumble over soon.

The push and pull between fear and hope had started to favor a winner in her mind, especially with the addition of Draco’s fastidious research that, too, seemed to lead nowhere. But she’d wanted to sleep with him when she knew him, fully. Selfishly, perhaps, she wanted all her context, all her history. She wanted to know what it meant to her to be with him in that way.

But in every day that passed, she saw fewer and fewer reasons to believe that her condition would change in a spontaneous act of recovery or that her stymied healers would suddenly announce a breakthrough. Her proverbial candy stash of hope had dwindled to less than half full. So the cliff she approached, tangled in his limbs and at the mercy of his mouth, started to look like an increasingly welcome leap into the unknown.

Her chest heaved, struggling to draw proper breath even after he released her lips and began a path of sweltering kisses down her neck, across her clavicle, and lower. Her blouse shifted and Hermione received confirmation that she must have remembered to leave that third button undone because his entire body stilled. He exhaled a strangled sort of breath, the air from which coasted across the curve of her breast, beneath the fabric of her blouse, and straight to the live wire of nerves between her legs.

“Fuck,” he murmured, resuming his worship of the skin at the edges of her blouse, shifting it further, stepping closer to the ledge.

Hermione’s head rolled back, body arching under the rapture of physical praise. Her eyes, half-open, caught on the clock in the kitchen.

“Fuck,” she breathed with far less reverence than Draco.

He paused, looking up at her with a molten ring of mercury orbiting an enormous pool of black in his eyes. He understood they’d run out of time in the space of one severely disappointed blink. With an overly dramatic sigh, he pushed himself up and leaned back against his heels. He offered a hand and pulled her to a sitting position, close to his chest. He leaned into her ear. “This isn’t over.”

Hermione had very little ability to respond. She just let her hands trace random runes across his chest as her breathing returned to normal.

Draco cleared his throat, sitting back and putting some distance between them. He cast a quick charm to press the wrinkles out of his clothes and then did the same to hers. The creases in her linen pants had turned into a crime scene detailing every dangerous intention she’d had mere moments before.

“If I didn’t need to get the taste of that dreadfully tacky christening out of my mouth, I’d say we just skip this party altogether,” Draco admitted with a faint look of disdain crossing his features.

Hermione let out a soft laugh. “You would not. James would be so disappointed. This won’t be nearly as bad as the christening. It’s just close friends and family, very small.”

He grumbled something mostly unintelligible and stood, posture schooled back into the effortless elegance he wore as easily as his tailored clothes. He offered her his hand and they left. Together.

—

Hermione leaned against a counter in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place, cradling a handful of Daisy Weasley while chatting with Ron, surprisingly at ease. It wasn’t the most stimulating conversation, not that it always was with Ron, but it was easy and familiar and that certainly counted for something.

“Is she sleeping well?” Hermione asked, swaying slightly and smiling at the drowsy baby in her arms.

Ron laughed. “Merlin, no. Apparently, I owe Ginny an apology for making fun of her when she complained about James.”

Hermione smiled, remembering the wails she’d heard from James during a number of visits after bedtime. For a moment, she locked eyes with Draco across the long and narrow kitchen. Wedged between Lavender and Ginny, with Harry trying desperately to keep James from crawling up onto the table and grabbing at the collection of candies and sweets there, Draco watched her too.

Months ago she might have expected to see jealousy or suspicion behind his eyes as she stood one on one with Ron. But instead, he had a soft look on his face, the beginnings of a smirk pulling at the corner of his mouth.

She looked away, distracted briefly by George’s eruption of laughter on the other side of the kitchen as he talked with Molly.

“The christening was lovely, by the way,” she told Ron, hoping she sounded sincere.

“Thanks, ‘Mione. It meant a lot to Lavender. The food afterward was good, wasn’t it?”

She hummed an agreement, but remembered it as bland. She smoothed a few baby-fine strands of strawberry blond hair near Daisy's temple, still swaying.

She glanced back up at Draco. He watched as Lavender gesticulated wildly, clearly excited about whatever story she told. Ginny looked slightly horrified as she watched. Hermione couldn't help but smile at the carefully neutral expression she saw Draco wearing, so obviously disingenuous to her newly trained eye, but likely a vision of politeness to anyone else in the room. Her heart clenched at his effort.

As Hermione watched her spouse, evidently Ron watched his as well. She heard him groan beside her.

"I hope she's not telling the story of my first nappy—" he started.

"Ron, why did we break up?" Hermione interrupted. It felt urgent, suddenly, that she know. Or rather, it finally felt like the right time.

She turned to face him again as he blinked at her, perhaps startled to be interrupted or just confused at the abruptness of the request.

"Oh," he said. "Well, you're smarter than me." He paused and then chuckled. "And I don't mean just generally, though that's also true. You—saw it before I did. The things we have in common aren't really ours, you know?"

He crossed his arms in front of him, leaning heavily against the counter behind them. He seemed casual, unconcerned as if this topic had been laid to rest long ago.

"We had Harry, school, a war—but our interests? You hate Quidditch and I didn't even read the pregnancy books Lav bought me. Couldn't have worked," he concluded simply. He offered her a small smile. It was a simplified version of familiar logic, her own, she knew.

Her brain conjured a single thought in the moments that followed: Draco Malfoy tried to read her favorite book every year even though he hated it.

When she looked back up at Draco she met his gaze. He looked partly amused and partly exhausted. He arched one of his questioning brows at her. She watched him bring his glass to his lips, taking a sip before lowering it again. His eyes tracked with the motion of the glass, inspiring hers to do the same.

She watched as he tapped it against the table: once, twice, three times, and then looked back up at her. His smirk grew, a bit of conspiracy behind his eyes.

The action felt familiar, in the way that the echoes and reflexes that had begun to govern her instincts felt familiar. She turned to Ron.

“Can I hand her off?” she asked him.

“Of course, thanks for giving me a break,” he said, lifting Daisy from her arms.

Without entirely knowing why, Hermione made her way across the kitchen, pausing beside Draco.

“Could I steal you for a minute?” she asked both to him and to the group. Ginny was too distracted by Albus yanking on her hair to respond, but Lavender looked genuinely disappointed before Ron joined them and distracted her with Daisy.

“Cake in a fifteen,” Harry said without looking up from where James had a variety of candies and toys scattered across the table, attention flitting from one to another faster than Harry could collect them from the floor or prevent them from rolling to the other end of the table. George joined them, lowering himself beside Harry and scooting a variety of toys and sweets closer to James just as Harry sighed in defeat.

Draco rose with a look of confidence that concluded he wouldn’t be missed and followed Hermione out of the kitchen.

She didn’t have a plan beyond stealing him, but suddenly she couldn’t put enough space between herself and the kitchen with its modest gathering for James, even if just for a moment. An echo of their kiss on the sofa hummed through her veins.

“What was that thing you were doing?” Hermione asked, turning to him. “With your glass on the table? It felt—familiar, in a way.”

Draco stood close to her in the stairwell where they’d stopped, a smile stretching across his face.

“It’s just a thing we do sometimes, a request for assistance. I’m glad you got the message.” He reached out and tucked a curl behind her ear as he stepped even closer, a casual sort of playfulness evident in his features.

Hermione tried to restrain the throb of disappointment. “Had enough of Harry and Ginny today?” she asked, trying to sound indifferent.

She saw concern tighten the muscles around his eyes, a slight furrow along his brow.

“I like Potter and the Weaslette,” he said, slowly, as if he wished he didn’t have to verbalize it. “I don’t mind spending time with them. Lavender, though, was telling a very graphic birthing story that I could have gone my entire life without hearing.”

Regardless of rationality, a tinge of disappointment still lingered behind Hermione’s ribs. But Draco’s concern evaporated, burned up by the heat behind his eyes as he pushed forward again, practically touching her. The wooden railing from the stairs dug almost painfully into her spine. It didn’t bother her at all.

“My primary reason to request your presence, however,” he started, dropping his face closer to hers, a wicked smirk spreading. “Was so that I could get you alone.”

The blank spaces inside Hermione’s brain took hold. Not because she sought a memory she didn’t know or because she felt the sharp reminder of their absence. Rather, because they were the easiest spaces to slip into when Draco stole her faculties with his touch or tongue.

“Oh,” she managed, trying to kick start her thinking back to life, struggling against the warmth of his breath skating across her cheek and neck. When his fingertips dug into her hips, finally touching her, she found her thoughts again. And they were singular in their intent.

She grabbed at one of his hands and pulled him up the stairs. The chuckle that chased her only propelled her faster until, two flights up, she tugged him into the corridor and pulled him to her, tangling her fingers in his hair like she had that morning. Slightly out of breath from her ascent and from the suffocating proximity he offered, Hermione didn’t mind in the slightest as his lips and tongue stole more oxygen from her lungs.

There was little reverence in these kisses, only hunger and desperation and a kind of catharsis from the waiting and the wanting and the strictness of a schedule designed to keep them focused on the issue of her memory and not the conflagration they were capable of.

Hermione didn’t even wince when her back made contact with the

elaborately paneled wood lining the wall; she didn't mind the frenzy, she felt it too.

Draco pulled back, a shuddering breath betraying the tremors in his control. He reached out, a hand finding her neck, dipping. His fingers trailed a white-hot path across her throat, over her clavicle, and towards the spot above her heart. An echo of such a motion ripped its way through shattered synapses, forging connections and bridging blank spaces in her brain with new experiences, rewriting the ones she no longer knew.

But his hand didn't stop above her heart as it had once upon a time, it dipped lower still, past the third button she'd left undone, landing precariously on the fourth.

He watched her carefully, want seeping from the wavering edges of his caution and control.

"May I?" he asked, thumb and forefinger poised on the button. The question barreled through her: an ignition seeking fuel.

Now long accustomed to the lack of oxygen they'd burned up, Hermione nodded through a strangled breath. Her own hands reached out for his belt loops to pull him closer. She felt the satisfied puff of breath as his mouth found her neck, the fourth button, and several others beneath it, already undone in an expert display of dexterity.

Hermione's breath came in shallow pants as his fingers traced the lacy edge of her bra with a near criminal level of restraint that had her pulling his hips closer, a small whine escaping her.

"It's disconcerting," he began between the tiny explosions he set against her neck with his mouth. "Pansy is much too invested in my taste in lingerie."

Hermione bit at her bottom lip, lightheaded from her quest for adequate air supply. Her eyes tracked Draco's movements with a resolute fixation. Each moment a digit slipped, infinitesimally so, beneath the edge of the lace, arson against her skin, she sucked in a tiny breath of anticipation.

"She's quite charitable," Hermione barely choked out. "Pansy just wants what's best for us."

What was she even saying? Did her words make sense? Were they true sentences or just fragments of whatever ideas she could string together

under his persistent and all-consuming touch?

“Very charitable,” he murmured in agreement as his lips dropped to her clavicle at the same time his hand swept upward, shrugging the neck of her blouse and the strap of her bra off her right shoulder, exposing a whole new expanse of skin. Hermione had to brace herself on his shoulders, needing contact of her own as her head fell back against the wall.

He began mapping the skin where her bra strap had once been with his lips, trailing kisses and nips and fleeting breaths of praise as his mouth dipped lower, closer to the cup of laced fabric held in place only by the quality of its construction. With a sharp movement, or perhaps an insistent nudge from a wandering mouth, they could drop well into the unknown beyond the ledge.

“Oh gods, someone *scourgify* my eyes,” came Harry’s horrified voice from the direction of the stairs.

Draco froze, lips still pressed to her skin just above her breast. Hermione’s eyes popped open, spotting her oldest friend facing away from them, glasses dangling from one hand, the other forcibly pressing the heel of his palm against his eyes. Harry’s posture sank, head dropped, still adamantly facing the stairwell.

Draco still had Hermione pressed against the wall, taking time with his cease-fire. As he pulled himself straight, his mouth dragged a path against her skin, all the way up to her ear where his breath came out harsh in a hot whisper.

“Not finished,” he grit as he righted her bra and blouse with a surprisingly gentle hand despite the frustration emanating from him.

“So we’re *really* back at this again, then?” Harry asked, sounding far away and like he was talking mostly to himself. “It was nice. For a while. Not having to worry about walking in on this every time you two disappear,” he added with a sigh. “Cake’s cut downstairs. Please don’t have sex in my kids’ rooms.”

As Harry walked back down the stairs at a startlingly brisk pace. Hermione released a giggle, bordering on hysteria, as she clutched Draco for support.

“Does he—has that—" she fought for her words between the giggles and absurdity. “I get the sense that’s not the first time Harry’s witnessed something like that.”

“It’s his own fault,” Draco told her, still looking at her with a predatory sort of pull at the edges of his mouth. “Naturally suspicious, trained in observation, Auror. If he’d just stop wondering where everyone is and what everyone is doing all the time he’d live a much more peaceful life.”

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George intercepted Hermione and Draco as they stepped into the kitchen mere minutes later.

“You two haven’t seen any not-at-all-suspicious looking nougats floating around anywhere, have you?” he asked, failing at nonchalance.

Hermione’s eyes narrowed. “Oh, George. You didn’t.”

He held his hands up in defense. “Just a party prototype. Wasn’t planning on using it today, but I might have misplaced—"

Whatever excuse he had planned died in his throat at the sound of a cough, followed by a wild giggle, and then a papery sort of explosion.

George’s eyes bulged as he spun. James sat at the kitchen table, cake presented in front of him, flanked by his parents, as he coughed a spray of confetti across the table. Ginny already had her wand drawn, advancing on her brother.

“Don’t let it touch you,” George yelped at the same time Harry tried calming his son, who alternated between confusion and hysteria, confetti spreading everywhere, covering Harry.

“It’s not harmful, just annoying—" George started as Harry began hacking his own party’s worth of confetti from his mouth. Ginny, forgetting her offensive towards George, whipped back around at the sound of her husband joining her son in the chaos that was the act of spewing confetti everywhere.

Lavender apparated with a *pop,* taking Daisy with her as Ron grabbed for George. “You brought the *Coughing Confettis?* Are you mad?”

“Where’s Albus?” Hermione asked, her hand holding onto Draco’s

forearm as she tried to make sense of the madness in the kitchen.

“Mum’s in the other room changing him,” Ron answered as a single piece of papery confetti fluttered into the space between him and George.

Hermione stepped further away, noting that Ginny had started coughing up confetti of her own in the background.

The single shard of paper flitted through the air as Ron and George broke apart. The force from their movement sent the air between them swirling and the tiny piece of paper found a home against George’s exposed wrist.

The effect was almost instantaneous, choking up a colorful spew of confetti all over Ron, who in turn heaved his own into the air.

Draco spun, pushing Hermione through the kitchen doorway with an order. “Keep Molly and Albus out of here.”

Hermione almost wanted to laugh; it was such a ridiculous sight, and if not for James’s obvious confusion in not understanding what was happening, she might have found it absolutely hysterical. Ginny’s string of very not-kid-friendly threats towards George, punctuated by coughs of confetti, bordered on comedy gold.

But Hermione backed away regardless. Because at the same time Draco shoved her out of the room, Ron’s projectile party landed squarely against Draco’s back. Hermione could see fluttering bits of paper puffing up over the back of his neck, settling onto the skin around his collar. Draco whirled back towards the kitchen, choking out a bout of his own confetti.

Hermione ran into Molly not five steps from the kitchen, Albus in her arms, frown in place as the door to the kitchen slammed shut.

“What’s going on?” Molly asked in a most motherly tone.

“George,” was all Hermione supplied, and it was plenty of explanation.

A retching from beyond the door caused Molly’s brows to lift for a moment before they fell with resignation. She settled Albus against her hip and turned to Hermione.

“Under control?” Molly asked with a curious glance towards the

kitchen.

“Unclear,” Hermione admitted.

Molly released a heavy sigh, digging deep for a resolve the woman could only have cultivated after years of experience with such things.

“Well let’s get cozy and wait it out,” Molly said, ushering Hermione into the sitting room while they waited for the smoke, or in this case confetti, to clear.

—

Nearly an hour later, Hermione finally stepped back through the Floo to her flat with an exceptionally perturbed Draco Malfoy on her arm.

He jerked away from her, stumbling towards the kitchen as he let out a strangled cough. Several pieces of confetti fell from his lips. All things considered, it was a modest showing.

“How much longer is it supposed to affect you?” Hermione asked cautiously. She didn’t have all the details on whatever happened in that kitchen, but shortly after the near persistent sounds of coughing subsided, an unintelligible chorus of shouts erupted in its place.

And then Draco emerged with a scowl, headed straight to the Floo.

“Before Ginny got him with a bat bogey hex George admitted he had no idea. Just keep your distance in case they’re still multiplying. I can’t have you doing this, too.” Draco had already vanished the pieces of confetti that landed on the counter.

“How can I help?” Hermione asked, poised on the balls of her feet, rocking between movement and not knowing where her pending momentum should take her.

“Just—stay away.”

“Yes, we’ve covered that. What else?”

Draco’s head fell back as he let out a groan that dissolved into a cough, tiny puffs of confetti pluming into the air from his mouth.

“All this coughing has me feeling nauseous,” he said with an angry vanishing of the papery bits. “I’m not pleasant when I don’t feel well,” he added, looking at her, practically begging. “You should get out while you still can,” he concluded.

“Sounds like you may be a bit dramatic, too,” Hermione replied, hands on her hips. She had no intention of going anywhere.

He groaned again and pivoted, walking past her and flopping onto the sofa in a movement reminiscent of Theo’s mannerisms. He dropped an arm over his face and lay in silence.

Hermione still had her hands on her hips, supplemented by her head now tilted to one side. In the intervening standoff, neither of them moved or spoke for a number of minutes until Draco finally lowered his arm from his face and peered at her.

“I think I might be sick,” he admitted, looking more furious than nauseous.

“Toilet is that way,” Hermione told him as she crossed her arms and nodded towards the hallway.

Draco didn’t move. He only released a large sigh and reached for a decorative pillow to wedge beneath his head.

He looked up at her again, frustration warring a path across his face, followed closely by a fair bit of reluctant acceptance.

“My throat’s been thrashed,” he said, then paused. “If you don’t plan on saving yourself could you at least make some tea?”

He did not look pleased with her smirk.

—

“How are you feeling?” Hermione asked, glancing over the book she’d started reading, curled in the large armchair opposite the sofa.

He didn’t move. He had his arm draped over his head again. His steady breath in and out was the only indication to Hermione that he was still among the living. Over the last couple of hours, she sat in almost complete silence with him while he, for lack of more

appropriate terminology, wallowed.

“I feel like I’m tired of coughing up fucking confetti every time I open my mouth,” he grumbled.

“It’s been at least thirty minutes. I think you may have survived, touch and go as it was for a moment there,” she teased, incapable of hiding the smile in her voice.

He tilted his head just enough to shoot a glare in her direction, which only caused her grin to spread.

“It’s been very unpleasant.”

“Yes, I’m sure it has been.”

“You have no sympathy for my pain.”

Hermione rolled her eyes and closed her book, setting it aside so she could stand. She crossed the room, feeling confident that the confetti explosions had finally run their course. She motioned for him to shift so she could sit with him, perched next to his prone form.

“I suppose this isn’t all that surprising considering your reaction to a Hippogriff scratch in third year,” she mused, threading their hands together, a smile firmly planted on her face.

“Yes, yes. I’m objectively inept at being unwell. It’s a character flaw, one of the few I accept about myself.”

Hermione couldn’t help but laugh.

“I suppose I could learn to overlook it,” she told him.

He looked thoughtful for a moment.

“Well, you’re in luck,” he finally said. “I’m not sick often. The last time was a couple of years ago, though that was—miserable.”

Hermione leaned against him. “And somehow we both survived.”

She saw the twist of a frown flash across his face. He gave her hand a pulse of pressure, reassurance for one of them. She watched him sink into a well of memories, a pool separate from her own.

“You know, I didn’t get my story yet today if you wanted to tell me about it,” she said.

The tense breath he released sent a bolt of worry coursing through her, the playfulness in her mood dissipating.

“I don’t like this one,” he admitted.

“Then you don’t have to—"

“No, you should probably hear it."

He didn’t continue. Instead, a quiet crackled around them as he drew together whatever words he wanted to use to explain himself.

“We’d broken up,” he started.

“What? ”

“Not long after that Christmas with my family. Disinheritance is a complicated legal process, takes time. You—didn’t want me to have to give everything up. You insisted I had to be absolutely sure.”

“Well that—makes sense, I suppose.”

He groaned.

“Please don’t agree with yourself. It was awful enough the first time. I was furious with you for being an idiot.” Hermione bristled, on the cusp of denying it but Draco didn’t give her the chance. “Because the real reason we should have broken up was that I’m not good for you,” he continued. His hand brushed the scar above her right brow. “I put you in harm’s way.”

“I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself,” Hermione said. He surprised her by smiling.

“I know that now. I knew it then, too. I just didn’t give you enough credit,” he paused. He brought her hand to his lips and brushed her knuckles with a kiss. “You moved out, got this place.” He gestured around them.

“We didn’t handle being apart very well. I was a wreck; you’ve told me you were too. I think we were both spooked, after that dinner, by how much it—we—really mattered to each other, if that makes sense.”

She nodded. Not long ago it would have made no sense at all. It would have been baffling, bewildering, befuddling. But now, with a veneer of context trying to patch the gaps of memory in her head, it somehow

managed to make sense despite every reason to the contrary. She leaned over, bringing herself to face to face with him, finding herself laying on the sofa with him for the second time that day.

“It makes sense,” she said, needing to verbalize what could have easily been left as a silent agreement.

“You took this sofa with you when you left, you know,” he told her as if the fact had just occurred to him. He looped a casual arm around her waist.

“I took your sofa when I moved out?” she asked.

He laughed and Hermione tensed, just briefly, at the intrusive concern that more confetti might spill from him. Instead, he clarified. “This is your sofa, technically.”

“Excuse me, *what?* ” That might have been more unbelievable than the breakup.

The dimple on the side of his face made an appearance as the hand on her waist found its way to her hair, smoothing wild curls away from her face.

“We’re not telling that story right now,” he teased. “This is about me being pathetic while ill.”

“Then perhaps you should find the point, Draco.”

“So impatient.” The hand in her hair now openly explored her face and neck.

“That’s already been established.”

He laughed again.

“I got a cold a few months later, you’ve since insisted that it wasn’t even that bad. But as I refused to rescind my request for disinheritance I couldn’t exactly call on the house elves to help. Being sick by myself was a new experience.”

“Poor thing.” Hermione's sympathized carried with it a hint of teasing.

“Truly,” he agreed, oblivious to the joke. “I didn’t exactly take care of myself and wouldn’t let anyone else help. Theo tried recruiting you to assist. That’s the only time I’ve ever seen the two of you disagree. Then Blaise tried to convince you, which also didn’t work.”

“Next came Pansy, I assume?”

“Exactly. Though she and I hadn’t been close since school. But Theo and Blaise got it in their heads that a woman’s perspective would change your mind and somehow convinced her to help. So you have them to thank for bringing that whirlwind of a woman into your life, by the way.”

Hermione shrugged, feeling generous. “She does have good taste in lingerie.”

Draco made a noise of agreement as his eyes dipped from her face, just long enough for it to be obvious.

“Don’t distract me,” he said. “I don’t know how, but the Pansy tactic worked. You took pity on me, she and I figured out how to be friends again, and a few months later you agreed to marry me.”

“Broken up to engaged in a few months? I suppose we didn’t waste time.” Hermione spoke the thought out loud, adding line items to the growing timeline of her life inside her head.

“Oh, we did more than that,” Draco said with a growing smile, an infectious kind of happiness radiating from him. “By the end of the year we’d married and I was officially and completely disowned.” He referred to the combination of those two things as if they could be nothing but unequivocally good.

Hermione’s eyes widened. She’d considered where along the line in her missing six years she and Draco had actually married, but finally having confirmation of the timing solidified the amorphous event in her head, suddenly so real and so unreachable, locked inside her mind.

The despair of not knowing did what it always did: crashed her ability to appreciate a memory in the same way Draco could. Because right in front of her, literally face to face as they lay entangled together on the sofa, he’d slipped into a state of contentedness that Hermione could only wish to experience.

Of all things, coughing confetti fluttered to the forefront of her mind.

“Draco,” she started, the thought unwinding itself into something linear and logical inside her head. “Draco, what if it’s not related to potions at all?”

“Your memories?” he asked, brows furrowing as he studied her.

“You said just this morning you still weren’t finding anything. Maybe it really is something else and the healers are just looking at the wrong combinations. What if it was one of George’s pranks that interacted with a cursed artifact?” Hermione felt ill at ease, the thrill and anxiety of a potential discovery starting to accelerate her heartbeat in an unpleasant way.

“Did George pull any pranks in January? Sometime around my accident?” she asked Draco, searching him with a renewed sense of wonder, hoping the answer would be an easy yes.

Draco’s mouth set into a line of disappointment.

“No, he didn’t,” Draco said. “The last we saw him was—October maybe? The only interesting thing that happened to us in January was when we flipped the guest room and I ended up with a cauldron crushing my chest.”

Hermione’s disappointment felt like a downpour. The potential elation at a new, viable idea was instantly dampened by a deluge of improbability. For such a brief moment she held visions in her head of solving this with Draco, of figuring out why she’d lost so much and gotten none of it back after so long. The beckoning of a solution, governed by logic and reason, could have drawn her in and drowned her for all she cared, as long as she could have her answers.

She tried not to let that disappointment translate to her face, knowing that the pull at her lips and eyes had probably already betrayed her internal sinking. She forced a wary smile, optimism in the face of disillusionment.

“Well, it was worth considering,” she concluded, letting him pull her closer. Something else occurred to her.

“Speaking of that guest room,” she started. “Do we have an illegal clutch of Chimera eggs in there? Theo mentioned some items I may or may not have confiscated—dangerous portkeys, illegal time turners, *Class A Non-Tradeable Materials.* just the sorts of things one keeps lying around in one’s home.”

The rumble of Draco’s quiet laugh was something she felt more than she heard, held against his chest as they lay together.

“We did. But it’s safe to say anything you had confiscated has been

thoroughly smashed to bits after what we managed in there, Chimera eggs included.”

Chapter End Notes

> i love and appreciate kudos and comments if you feel so inclined to let me know what you think!! also, come hang out with me on tumblr, its a good time!

Chapter 9: Blaise Zabini

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Woman is sacred; the woman one loves is holy."

— Alexandre Dumas, The Count of Monte Cristo

—

September

Hermione's entire world dropped out from beneath her: a pit, a crevasse, a tunnel bore straight to the center of the earth where she might meet her end in molten rock. Caverns of absolute nothingness yawned wide inside her, swallowing her tender hidden pockets of hope, tasting like apple candies.

Can you repeat that? She tried to ask, but those blank spaces in her brain took control, and perhaps for the first time out of benevolence, to shield her from the bomb that just went off in that awful, terrible excuse for an examination room at St. Mungo's. Swallow the hope or be swallowed by it?

Draco spoke instead, a visceral bite lacing his tone that she'd not heard in years.

"For a moment, *Jenkins,* it sounded like you said you're done researching a cure for my wife."

Draco meant it as a question, Hermione knew he did. But the way he'd said it, with such barely contained fury, it sounded more like a last rite read at a time of execution.

Which wasn't dissimilar from how Hermione felt.

A stern look crossed Healer Lucas's face, looking unimpressed with Draco's hard tone. Even Jenkins seemed like he might be in the process of growing a backbone, refusing to wilt under Draco's anger.

Hermione crawled out of the pit inside her mind, shoving aside her agony.

“Mr. Malfoy, Mrs. Granger-Malfoy,” Healer Lucas began, removing the glasses from her face and clasping her hands calmly across her lap. Jenkins’s short-lived resolve wavered as he sank into his chair, a cross between acceptance and exhaustion. “Jenkins has many responsibilities as my apprentice in addition to his full caseload in long-term trauma care. St. Mungo’s does not have indefinite resources to dedicate to a single case.” She’d said it factually, without malice or spite, but the reality still stung. “The fact of the matter is that Hermione’s case has plateaued and without any viable ideas about the nature of her type of memory loss, it simply isn’t affordable for the hospital to continue spending money on experimental research.”

“And if the money was no object?” Draco demanded just as Healer Lucas had finished her thought.

“Is it no object?” she asked.

Hermione saw him flinch, just barely, as his brain caught up with his words. Of course the money mattered: *now*. She wondered how often that happened. How regularly did he slip into the skin of a wealthy man, raised with the ability to bend wills with Galleons?

Draco didn’t answer. The muscles in his face had all tightened, lips pressed flat, nostrils flared, breathing unnervingly even and controlled. A flush of redness crept up the side of his pale neck, splotching and irritated. Hermione couldn’t see his eyes from his profile, but she suspected he hadn’t resorted to Occlumency, despite his anger. She couldn’t decide if it was better or worse that he was trying to manage without it.

Healer Lucas took the silence in the room as an opportunity to continue.

“We’d like to shift the frequency of your visits to once every three months,” she told Hermione. “We’d still like to monitor any changes in the physical structure of your brain, but at this point, we suspect that if your memories do eventually return, it will simply take time. Your diagnosis and your care plan will not change. We’re simply reducing the appointment frequency to better suit the present nature of your condition.” They were empty words, useless things: vacuous in a way *irreparable* was not. At least *irreparable* had direction to it, certainty towards the unfavorable. These words though, they were

nothing.

If numbness had a feeling, this was it. Both hot and cold, painful yet serene, something adrift and on fire, barbs and quills biting at every nerve beneath her skin: a monster of unfeeling scratching its way to the surface from the dark, haunted hollows that took up so much of her internal space.

“Thank you, Healer Lucas, for your time today,” Hermione said in a determined, distant version of her own voice. She nodded briefly at both healers before tugging at Draco’s hand, forcing him to stand.

He did so reluctantly, slowly. A muscle along his jaw had started to twitch. He focused his attention on Jenkins, a glare demanding more from the healer who looked very much like he wished to become invisible. But Draco’s outrage would get them nowhere. Hermione was but a small component in the enormous contraption that was St. Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries and she’d just been rendered irrelevant in what was probably the nicest way they could have done so. They let her down gently, over months. She still ended up on the ground, barren of her memories and her hope.

Hermione steered them out of the examination room, hand still clasped firmly in Draco’s, and brought them to a pair of chairs in the waiting area.

Draco didn’t sit. Instead, he paced. He clenched and unclenched his fists. He heaved huge breaths and didn’t seem capable of calming his furious movements. Occasionally, Hermione caught the sound of muttered *fucks* beneath his breath.

“Draco—" Hermione started.

He lifted a hand, agitation stretching him taut.

“Just— give me a minute,” he forced through a tense jaw.

Hermione crossed her hands in her lap and watched as he began pacing again.

“Fuck,” he muttered after several more turns around the waiting room.

“Draco, just—"

He sucked in a sharp breath, fists at his side practically vibrating

through his exhale.

“Not yet,” he snapped.

Hermione drew in a frustrated breath of her own, and allowed him a few more paces before deciding that if anyone deserved to have a meltdown in a public space after that news, it was her.

“If you’re thinking what I think you are,” she said with a finality that conveyed she would not be quieted again. “We don’t need your parents’ money to extend the research into my case. I don’t—I don’t deserve any special treatment. No more than anyone else would receive. It wouldn’t be fair.”

Draco stopped pacing but he did not turn to her. “I know that,” he said, terse. “The money part, not what you deserve. Because you deserve fucking all of it.” His shoulders fell and he finally turned to her, allowing himself to sit in the chair beside her. “But I know you’d never want special treatment. I just—I needed a minute to be angry. My pride took a beating in there.”

“Just your pride?” she asked, trying to tease, trying to find something to latch onto that wasn’t numbness.

For a moment, she thought she saw some of her own vacancies in his face: a creeping threat of nothingness.

“The pride is the easiest thing to handle. The rest of it, I can’t even—"

Hermione wouldn’t have been surprised if he cracked a tooth with the way he ground his jaw together.

“If you had the money,” Hermione began, momentary curiosity distracting her from the finality of what felt very much like defeat. “You’d use it anyway, wouldn’t you? Even if I didn’t want special treatment?”

He had his hand in a fist again, bouncing up and down on the arm of his chair. Even through his anger, she saw a brow arch.

“You really want me to answer that?” he asked.

“I suppose not,” she admitted. “I know the answer.”

He unfurled his fist and reached for her hand. “No point arguing about my theoretical betrayal of your wishes. We’re certainly not in a

position to fund a research department at St. Mungo's as it stands right now. Moot point."

"They're giving up," Hermione said with a quiet voice, anchored to his hand in her grip.

"That doesn't mean we are." She clung to his forced confidence with everything she had as her hope withered and rotted and died one last time.

Maybe they should.

—

In the days after that appointment at St. Mungo's, where her healers admitted defeat and left her to wander the landmines in her life with no hope to disarm them, Hermione didn't read a single book about memory loss.

She'd been voracious, utterly insatiable for months as she devoured every last ounce of information on the topic available to the muggle and wizarding worlds alike. And now suddenly, the taste of it left her feeling sick and she couldn't bring herself to choke it down.

Instead, she watched Draco, studying him in the same way she'd studied her own predicament. She'd been waiting, she realized, more than she'd even admitted to herself, clinging to a hope that memory would make the hard decisions for her. Because the hardest of those decisions was the one to allow herself to love him, independent of a past they did not share and based solely on the strange new version of reality that tragedy had dropped her into. And perhaps that was the last barrier between them, the one he saw that she couldn't. The one that kept him on a sofa and her in a bed.

If she couldn't have the old, she wanted the new. She wanted the chance to fall in love again. She wanted to give herself permission to experience and not expect, tired of everything she did hinging on the hope that it would bring her memory. That last barrier presented in the form of a ledge; she finally felt ready to jump.

"Any special requests for your birthday?" Draco asked as he set a plate of toast on the table next to their pot of morning tea.

She blinked, gathering her courage, and spoke plainly.

“I’d like for you to be able to sleep in your own bed,” she said.

He straightened against the back of his chair, eyes narrowing at her in suspicion.

“That sounds more like a gift for me. It’s going to be *your* birthday,” he began, still looking at her with a blank expression. He brought a piece of toast to his mouth, taking a bite. “Besides, I still think we have some other things to work through before—"

“On that topic,” Hermione interrupted. “I think I’d like to have sex with my husband again.”

Draco choked on his toast mid-swallow. He cleared his throat, blinked, and ran a hand from his brows, down the side of his face, and to his jaw.

“Fucking Gryffindor,” he finally said. “You can’t just spring something like that on a man.”

Hermione had spent the past few months making a sport out of getting him to smile. She hadn't realized how much fun catching him off guard could be, too. She smiled.

“You’re serious?” he asked with a look of incredulity. Then it shifted to something more awed. “You’re serious,” he repeated.

“I’m serious.”

“This doesn’t have anything to do with your appointment, does it?”

She tried not to balk. Sometimes he could be far too smart for his own good. And the irony of that observation was not lost on her.

“It does and it doesn’t,” she admitted. She found comfort in her tea, distracting herself and incapable of meeting his eye. “I’m tired of waiting for the past to catch up with me. I just—I’d like to move forward.”

“Is it time for big romantic gestures, then?” he asked. When she looked up at him she couldn’t quite believe the wild, crooked smile on his face or the crinkles at the corners of his eyes. “I told you I had them. If we’re going there, I plan to woo you first.”

“Woo me?” she laughed. “Will there be a courtship period as well?”

He snorted indelicately and then broke out into a true burst of laughter. Hermione reconsidered. Earning his smile was still her favorite. When his laughter subsided, he schooled his feature into something serious, leveling her with a no-nonsense sort of expression.

“Of course there won’t be a courtship; you’ve already married me.”

“Fair point,” Hermione conceded.

Draco looked thoughtful for a moment. The rapid thoughts vying for his attention flicked and flittered beneath his mask of seriousness faster than Hermione could make sense of them. Only when a smirk started to form did she know that he’d sorted through whatever thought process had enveloped him.

“I’m no longer accepting requests for your birthday,” he announced.

“Oh no?” Hermione lifted her brows, more amused than anything.

“No. I have a plan. It’s going to be perfect, and you get no say in it.”

“Perfect you say? So there will be books and Crookshanks and a Gryffindor theme?”

He glared at her.

“It’s going to be a surprise. But I can safely confess that those things will not be involved, fond of them as you may be.” He stood suddenly, his breakfast and tea clearly on the precipice of abandon. “I need to speak to Blaise, I’ll be back later this afternoon.”

Hermione found his excited energy both endearing and contagious. “And don’t—" he started, looking at her with a hint of mischievousness. “Don’t let Pansy pick your lingerie for your birthday. I’d like for this date to just be the two of us, regardless of how good her taste is.”

Hermione laughed, already imagining Pansy’s disappointment as Draco disapparated with a *pop.* Tea and toast completely forgotten.

—

Just over a week later, a day before Hermione’s birthday, Blaise

Zabini apparated into her flat mere moments after Draco left for work. He didn't greet her. He didn't say anything at all as he approached the kitchen table where Hermione nursed the remains of her morning tea. She glanced at the clock; these Slytherins boys clearly had her and Draco's work schedules memorized. The precision of planning involved was honestly a touch troubling.

"I have no plans to kidnap you," Blaise finally said, leaning back in the chair he'd chosen for himself beside her. "That's more Theo's style. I just wanted to drop this off." From the pocket of his extremely expensive looking robes, Blaise pulled a velvet jewelry box, the perfect size for a ring.

Hermione's brows lifted, concern and confusion etching their way across her face.

"No cigarette today?" Hermione asked in an effort to conjure a diversion from the conversation threatening to happen without her permission in her own kitchen.

"You don't like when I smoke in your home," Blaise answered as if the simplest answer was the most obvious.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Neither does Theo. But that certainly hasn't stopped you."

"Well, I'm not interested in sleeping with you."

"Not interested in sleeping—*Theo?"* Hermione cycled through a number of ways to respond to that news, but eventually settled on, "and you think ruining his textiles with cigarette smoke is helping you, what—flirt?"

"He'll figure it out eventually," Blaise explained away with a small shrug. "He's not quite as oblivious as you are." A pause. "Close though."

Hermione opened her mouth, cycled through a few more potential but ultimately unsatisfactory responses, and then closed it again when Blaise redirected their conversation back to his original purpose. Her attempts at diversion had not lasted nearly as long as she might have hoped.

"Your portkey," Blaise explained with a blasé flick to his wrist gesturing to the small box. "Activates at six o'clock tomorrow."

Hermione swallowed, her breath and her words and the majority of her thought processes stuck in a lump in her throat as her focus narrowed to the small box on her table.

“Is that—" she started to ask, but not needing to, not really.

“It is.” Blaise tipped further back in his chair, hand dangling towards the floor. To Hermione’s surprise, Crookshanks skulked from beneath the table and rubbed his head into Blaise’s hand. Blaise, for his part, didn’t acknowledge the cat’s arrival apart from the gentle scratching behind Crookshanks’s ears.

Hermione didn’t have the energy, or the time, to unpack that additional revelation.

“And you’re bringing me the portkey instead of Draco? I’m sure you’re aware you’ve just missed him.”

“Yes, intentionally so.”

Frustratingly, Blaise did not elaborate. He just kept balancing on his chair, hand dangling in reach of Crookshanks, and watching her with an uncomfortable look of fascination.

With a sigh, Hermione prompted him. “Why?” she asked with annoyance.

“I’ve already given Draco his portkey.”

Another pause, more lack of clarification.

“So then what’s this?” Hermione asked, huffing as she gestured to the box she most certainly did not want to open for the first time with Blaise Zabini as her only witness.

“This one is special, an alternative. Theo set it up just for you. In case you wanted to do something nice for Draco.”

Hermione’s eyes bulged. “So this is an unauthorized portkey?”

“That’s an interesting way to say illegal.”

She scowled at him.

“How did you even get this, anyway?” Hermione asked.

“Pansy stole it.”

Hermione shouldn't have been surprised. But her eyebrows shot up regardless, recent conversations about the value of boundaries feeling like little more than recitations of a monologue to a disinterested audience. She sputtered, trying to form coherent words, but instead smashed her lips together, twisted into a frown as she fought off her frustration.

"Everyone is getting their wards access revoked. No boundaries, any of you. You're all meddlesome annoyances."

"And that's an interesting way to say Slytherin," Blaise deadpanned. He lifted a calm brow, surveying her. "I should also like to point out that I am, in fact, returning your purloined possessions."

"After facilitating the creation of an illegal portkey."

"Technicalities."

"Unbelievable," Hermione huffed as she glanced at the clock. "Gods, and now I'm going to be late for work." She stood rapidly, casting a forlorn look at the remainder of her tea before shooting Blaise a deadly stare.

"Out," she ordered.

Blaise didn't argue. He simply returned his chair to all four legs and rose with an eery sort of elegance.

"Before I go," he began. "If you did feel so inclined as to put this to use, it will take you to the same destination as Draco's portkey." Blaise gestured to the box sitting on the table and taking up such a disproportionate amount of space. "And just know that Draco will almost certainly have this on him tomorrow, if you did want to ask to use it instead."

"And how exactly do you know he'll have it on him?" Hermione asked, hands finding her hips as she glanced again at the clock. If not for the fact that she arrived at work before her boss every day she would have been more concerned about the creeping passage of time as Blaise continued his interruption of her morning.

Blaise replied with a small tilt of his head. "I know where he's taking you."

Hermione barely registered the end of his sentence before Blaise disapparated with a *pop,* leaving her annoyed and confused in her own

kitchen.

She could be a little late for work if it meant rekeying her wards.

—

On the morning of her birthday, Hermione still had yet to decide if she wanted to use the ring. Using it, she knew, came with the heavy implication of wearing it, which came with the obvious fact that she'd have to actually see it, which she still hadn't done.

Because after Blaise left, and she'd rekeyed all the wards on the flat, she couldn't bring herself to look. Just as she'd resisted when Pansy pointed out where Draco kept it, Hermione didn't have it in her to cross that line without him present.

And when she had her opportunities to bring it up, she found herself uncharacteristically lacking the courage. It had felt like an impossible topic to broach back in March when Theo pointed it out in that booth at the Leaky. But now, March bled all the way into September, gushing from the severed artery of her avoidance.

So she waffled, painfully, between telling Draco that it had been made into a portkey and trying to ignore the issue altogether.

Because on top of all that, when she wasn't twisting herself into knots over the ring she knew she should have asked about months ago, Hermione was busy trying to find a way to tell Draco that it was time to give up researching her memory loss. He said he wouldn't give up until she told him to.

She needed to tell him to.

All things considered, Hermione had very little mental energy on the morning of her birthday to do anything other than stare at the empty bowl of sweets sitting atop the kitchen counter.

Draco finished them off the month before and hadn't moved the bowl in the absence of the apple-flavored candies. And Hermione didn't touch it either. She knew what they were waiting for. And apparently, her birthday would be the day.

She jumped when Draco's hands found her shoulders and he dropped a kiss on the top of her hair.

"You're awfully tense for someone who's celebrating a birthday tonight."

She leaned into his touch as he rolled the muscles on either side of her neck, his breath coasted along the side of her face as he dipped to place another small kiss beneath her ear.

"I have to survive a day of paperwork first," she reminded him.

"And I, a full day of brewing," he added. His hands dropped from her shoulders, wrapping instead around her middle as he hugged her from behind, mouth still dangerously close to her ear. "I'm not going to scare you off, am I?" he asked. "I just want to do something special."

Hermione was grateful she couldn't see his face. Because if she could see anything akin to the vulnerability she heard, it might break her in two and convince her to never tell him it was time to give up their research on her memory.

"I think you've suppressed your instincts towards the ostentatious long enough." Her hands found his arms where wrapped around her. "Woo me." A request, and order, a wish.

He chuckled against the side of her face as they stood there, a quiet moment before they each had to report to their respective places of work.

An impulse grabbed hold of Hermione's heart before she could think her way out of it. Her opportunities had almost entirely slipped away, leaving her with this last chance to request use of the ring for their evening. Strangely, it was exactly the impetus she needed; the threat of no longer having the choice forced her to make one.

"Draco," she started, turning in his arms and looking up at him. "Do you think I could wear my ring?" She spoke the words so simply, so easily, after months of anticipation. Reflex took control; it hadn't been a difficult thing at all.

He didn't react, not for a full, wildly uncomfortable thirty seconds while his stare darted between her eyes, evidently unsure where to land his focus. When his gaze settled, he almost looked dazed, as if she'd spoken her request in an unfamiliar tongue or accompanied her words with a *confundus*.

Then the smile grew. Small at first, only the tiniest twitch at the edges of his mouth that brought out the dangerous crinkles at the corners of his eyes. Then came the flash of teeth, growing more and more visible in tandem with the dimple on his left cheek. And finally, a single laugh by way of a disbelieving breath, puffing out from a place deeper than his lungs, connected directly to his heart.

“Of course,” he breathed rather than spoke, disentangling himself from her and pulling the same velvet box Blaise had delivered the day before from his trouser pocket.

“I don’t carry it with me all the time,” he muttered. A hint of shyness drew her in with its sincerity. “But today is—well, I suppose I could tell you now.”

He tore his eyes from the small jewelry box and looked at her.

“Tell me what?” Hermione asked, finding her voice surprisingly difficult to control, a watery wavering taking hold unbeknownst to her conscious mind.

“We got engaged two years ago today,” he said quietly, finally cracking open the pandora’s box of commitment and history and pain and withered hope.

She hadn’t expected what she saw. She’d seen it briefly when Pansy wore it, but certainly didn’t have a good opportunity to evaluate it then. And it wasn’t so much how it looked that wasn’t what she expected, but more how it felt. Because every time Hermione thought she’d located and watched her last bits of hope fall apart, she kept finding new shards, tucked away in hidden places or, in this case, jewelry boxes.

It sent a part of her heart crashing, finally seeing the ring presented by a beautifully hopeful Draco Malfoy, and finding no magic in its reveal. It brought no onslaught of memory, it triggered no landmines, it changed nothing at all.

But when Hermione tore her eyes from the ruby ring, flanked by its orbit of tiny diamonds, she found the missing magic behind Draco’s eyes, independent of whatever hope she’d unknowingly assigned to a piece of metal and expensive stones.

Because Draco looked at her like the memories didn’t matter. Or rather, like he might love her, could love her, would love her, with or without them. And regardless of whether he’d said it before, or done

everything to show her as much was true; this was the moment Hermione believed it completely.

Draco cleared his throat, plucking the jewelry from the box. He held it up between them. When Hermione had seen it on Pansy's hand it looked more grandiose, and perhaps that just came as a side effect of Pansy's tendencies towards the exaggerated. But between her and Draco, without the Pansy interference, Hermione could see herself wearing it, loving it.

Between the gold band and the ruby stone, a thought occurred to her.

"You gave me a Gryffindor colored ring?" she asked, a hint of amusement corralling some of her tension. She watched as his face twitched, a fight at the corners of his mouth not to react.

"Felt appropriate at the time," he answered carefully. His words sidestepped a different meaning. Hermione offered him her hand, brows lifted as she waited for him to elaborate: an affected snark to hide her nerves. His hands were warm against hers as he slid the ring on her finger, a long lost ship finally returning to port. Draco sighed, gripping her hand.

"It's actually an heirloom. From the Nott family vaults. I didn't have access to the Malfoy ones, obviously, and Theo—well, he was more than happy to help me tell them to fuck off."

Hermione groaned, fighting off the sudden tears that felt more frustrated than anything. "Gods he gave us one of his family heirlooms and I've just barred him from the wards?"

"You barred him from the wards?" Draco asked, tilting his head and reaching out to wipe away one of her tears.

"Blaise and Pansy, too," Hermione added. She lifted her hand to show off the ring between them. "They stole this and turned it into a portkey for tonight, activates at six." Defeated, Hermione let her hand fall. "I'm sure they just wanted to get me to finally ask you about it."

And instead of being upset as Hermione had been, as she would have expected him to be, Draco laughed, pulling her into a tight embrace. The vibrations from his laughing rocked through her. "Gods, I love my friends," she heard him say against the side of her head.

"I had a much different reaction," Hermione muttered, clutching him regardless and enjoying her moment of touch.

“I’m sure you did,” he said, pulling away, holding her hand with its newly adorned jewelry. “I can’t say I much mind their methods if this is the result,” he continued, as he lifted her hand and kissed her knuckles.

The ring might not have been magic itself, but there was still something magical in the promises it represented, in the friendships it testified for, and in the time she still had left. For a moment, Hermione allowed herself to believe in that kind of magic above all others.

She kissed him. She kissed him without the weight of expecting to remember something she couldn’t. She kissed him without the fear that her mind minus six years wouldn’t be enough. She kissed him with a new and different hope blooming, one of the future, forgetting the past.

—

When Hermione returned home from the most agonizingly long day of proofreading reports in the small dungeon the ministry called her temporary office, the first thing she noticed was the bowl of candies on the kitchen counter: full again.

Draco must have heard her apparition because he walked into the living room while wrangling his cufflinks into place almost as soon as she’d appeared. He followed her gaze.

“They arrived just as I got home from work,” he explained. “No note. But it’s the family owl so—"

Hermione couldn’t tear her eyes from the bowl. She was glad for him, she realized in an unselfish way utterly divorced from her own losses, that he could still have his hope. And even as that feeling sank like a stone inside her, she smiled.

“So if they arrive on my birthday, that makes them mine, right?” she asked, forcing lightness to become her. She wouldn’t wallow in her dark caverns any longer.

Draco barked a short laugh and advanced on her. He dropped a familiar, casual kiss at her temple.

“Not a chance,” he breathed into her skin. “Now, if you don’t mind, I was hoping you’d wear your navy dress tonight.”

“The one I wore to that disastrous dinner with Ron?”

Draco made a thoughtful noise, throat humming so close to her ear she could practically feel it. “One admittedly miserable night can’t ruin how beautiful you look in that dress.” With fingers of fire, his hand made contact with her lower back, gently steering her away from the living room. “And since you’re currently wearing our portkey"—a rapid glance at her left hand and an undeniable smirk—"you should probably get changed so it doesn’t steal you away from me.”

Hermione rolled her eyes; she had more than enough time, though she changed quickly regardless. She remembered the first time she'd put this dress on, feeling unfamiliar in her own skin but not altogether uncomfortable. Draco had told her it was his favorite and she’d be hard-pressed to disagree. She realized, for perhaps the first time since her accident that the reflection staring back at her in the mirror actually looked like her. Not her in a few years. Just her as she saw herself now.

It was a liberating, lovely kind of feeling. She looked like herself and she liked what she saw: a bit of a plunging neckline, a fitted bodice, and a subtle flair of the navy fabric that came to rest just above her knees. She felt beautiful, desirable, and like she might get exactly what she wanted out of her birthday.

She emerged from the bedroom with a few minutes to spare. Just enough time for Draco to gape, then grin, then grip at the flesh between her hips and waist, pulling her close as he kissed her through their departure.

—

“Are we—is this a vineyard?” Hermione asked as she shook off her dizziness from their landing. While portkeys were certainly one of her least favorite ways to travel, she wouldn’t mind getting used to them if it meant having Draco’s arms around her and his lips pressed to hers, smelling of spice and citrus and home.

“This is one of Blaise’s family properties,” Draco said as he threaded their fingers together: his left hand, her right. “We’re in Italy.”

“Theo made an illegal *international* portkey?” Hermione couldn’t help herself as she glanced at the now inactive ring on her left hand.

Draco just chuckled, pulling her to walk beside him through the rows of trellised vines around them.

“Your capacity to be surprised by his disregard for rules is truly impressive considering the number of laws you’ve broken in your lifetime,” Draco commented dryly, bait if she’d ever heard it. And even though she knew it was meant as such, she could feel herself stiffening, rising to it, wanting to challenge it.

“Care to test how much you’ve told me?” Draco smirked, turning to her. His free hand cupped her jaw and he leaned in to whisk a kiss from her before she could answer. He hovered close. “Because to be completely honest,” he continued. “I find my law-breaking, reckless, war heroine of a wife to be wildly attractive. I’m always open to discussing the finer points of my attraction.”

There was something about the air. Perhaps it was the proximity to the Mediterranean, or the dip south of the fiftieth parallel, or simply the exchange of breath between her lungs and his, but the vineyard winds around them had her feeling like kindling stepping far too close to his open flame.

Hermione smiled against his lips, losing herself in a moment not haunted by her past. “The wooing is going well so far,” she told him, already knowing she’d regret the look of self-satisfaction such a statement would inspire. But instead, when she observed him, he looked deadly serious.

“Good,” he said. “Now come on, we have a table set up just ahead.”

At the end of the row of wine in its ripening, a simple table stood, set for two.

“Private dining this evening?” Hermione asked, already feeling herself melt under the beauty and intimacy of such a setting.

“Two years ago we came here for your birthday, and as you now know, I also proposed.” He pulled out a chair for her in a display of his deeply ingrained gentlemanly habits. “I may not have my own wealth to spoil you with any more,” he said as he took his own seat

across from her. “But I do have several wealthy friends and a strong recollection of favors I’m owed.”

“But you know I don’t *need* any of this, gorgeous as it is,” Hermione insisted as a late summer breeze tickled her curls against the back of her neck.

Draco smiled the sort of way he did when she repeated herself, when she parroted back to him a conversation they’d had once before, one that he was too polite to point out, but that she recognized all the same.

“I know. But if ever there is an occasion to splurge…” he trailed off.

“You’ll do well to remember that next June.” Hermione lobbed the threat with her most innocent smile.

Draco stilled, perhaps assessing her seriousness. He narrowed his eyes at her, and then finally smirked.

“So we got engaged and then married by the end of the year,” she carried on, spoken like a question, but meant more as a catalogue, memorizing and placing the information in her mind, now that she had such a beautiful visual to accompany it. “And you were disinherited,” she concluded. That part couldn’t be forgotten.

“And it was absolutely worth it, before you try to ask,” he said.

She smiled. “I wasn’t going to.” A stream of curiosities ran through her head. “I do wonder, though. I asked you how it happened, but I didn’t exactly ask why—I realize it’s mostly obvious, and I can make educated guesses. It’s just, the more I think about it—it’s *so* much to give up, I can’t—"

He silenced the rapid train of thoughts she’d been verbalizing by reaching for her hand, a now familiar gesture between them.

“Barring the fact that I’m painfully, irrationally in love with you—there’s no other version of my life where I could ever do better than what I have with you, wealthy man or not.” He squeezed her fingers, thumb running along the top of the ring she’d now worn for a single day, but felt parallel to a lifetime. “You make everything in my life better,” he continued. “This is a hopelessly one-sided relationship where I get everything and I don’t understand why you’re still here.”

She swallowed, struggling to meet his eye.

“Is that what you’re so afraid of? That I’ll decide I don’t get anything out of this?”

“Every day.” The pressure of his hand in hers was unnervingly steady. A beat passed before he admitted the rest. “Especially since it happened.”

There was no need to clarify the *it* he spoke of. *It* had consumed nearly every aspect of her life since she’d woken up in St. Mungo’s in January. She carried it with her every day, and he did too.

The next second, a bottle of wine appeared at the table, gratefully pulling them from the seriousness of their conversation.

“Does that bottle say that it's the ‘Malfoy Vintage?’” Hermione asked, squinting at the elaborate script as Draco picked it up to pour.

He flashed her a knowing grin, his vulnerability shoved back into whatever sequestered corners he kept it in.

“Blaise can be convinced to be sentimental on occasion. This was the harvest from the year we got engaged.”

“How very Hufflepuff of him,” Hermione commented, watching with contentedness spreading warm within her as Draco poured her a glass.

He laughed. “Don’t tell him that.”

Their food appeared on the plates in front of them, a menu clearly determined ahead of time with every Italian indulgence Hermione could think of. She couldn’t deny the noise of anticipation that spilled from her as she eyed the assortment in front of her. Glancing up at Draco, he had that smug expression again: pleased with himself.

“This looks delicious,” she conceded, not even interested in denying him his satisfaction.

“Just a few of your favorites.” He shrugged. False humility looked ridiculous on him. The gloating was preferable.

“Speaking of Blaise,” Hermione started, taking a sip of what was allegedly her own bespoke vintage of Italian wine. “Are you aware that he thinks he’s been flirting with Theo?”

Draco burst into laughter, true humor on his face. “Everyone is aware of that,” he paused, taking a sip of his wine and watching her. He

smiled. “Except Theo, of course.”

“So Theo’s got me helping him hunt for a boyfriend a few times a month and he has no idea Blaise is—I don’t know, interested?”

“Well, Blaise thinks he’s being obvious and Theo is oblivious,” Draco commented.

Hermione considered that rather doomed combination as she sipped her wine and enjoyed her meal. In the crossfire of the cascading rays of light from the setting sun, it occurred to her just how utterly lovely an evening Draco had orchestrated. And despite being such a grand gesture, she felt no discomfort, no overwhelmed unease telling her it was too much. Because it was still so intimate, so simple: just a man and his wife.

“I can imagine,” she began. “That we weren’t much different, in the beginning—if I had to guess.”

“Different from what?” Draco asked as their plates cleared themselves, leaving only wine and conversation and a steadily fading light.

“Blaise and Theo,” she said. “I imagine I probably thought I was being quite obvious and you were oblivious.”

Draco laughed, so hard he had to set his glass of wine back down on the table. The shadows cast by the setting sun caught on the laugh lines spreading across his face, bathing him in both light and dark.

“If anyone was oblivious, it was you,” he finally said as his laughter settled into something fond. “I was the obvious one.”

Buoyed by wine and an affection bleeding from her bones, Hermione arched a brow at him.

“Slytherins are rarely obvious,” she insisted. “Gryffindors, however…” she let the end of her sentence trail off as she gathered nearly nine months of growing desire for the man in front of her and armed herself with the courage to act on it.

She placed her cloth serviette on the table, a deliberate motion that stalled whatever retort Draco had planned in his throat. She stood, a rush of adrenaline flooding her. Bravery, she knew. Anticipation, she welcomed. But the stuttering of her heartbeat behind the cage of bones inside her chest, she fought against. Because that was the part that made her feel wild, just a little out of control, uncertain of

herself.

She took two careful steps to Draco’s side of the small table and paused in front of him. She put her hands on her hips, a motion meant to hide the stuttering and stammering inside her chest under a pose that placed her in control.

Draco’s expression hadn’t changed from the moment she stood: the mixing of a smirk with anticipation, a darkening in his eyes in the ever fading late summer light.

Hermione was pleased to find her voice sounding solid and confident, despite how quiet she spoke. “Make room.”

A flash of confusion, faster than a lightning strike, was the only indication of Draco's surprise. With a quiet scrape of his chair against the compacted vineyard ground, he put space between himself and the table.

It was just enough room for Hermione to step forward, accepting the offering of his hands as he realized her intent, and sink into his lap. Her face hovered a decision away from the ledge she’d been approaching all evening.

She ran her hands up his chest and to the back of his neck, tangling them in his hair: her favorite tether. His grip around her waist pulled her as close to him as possible as one of his hands traveled up her spine, pausing in the middle of her back. His face turned the fraction required to make eye contact. A low noise emanated from his throat before he found his words.

“You’re not wearing a bra,” he said. It wasn’t a question.

“Who did you say was the obvious one?” Hermione asked in response. She leaned her face into his neck, needing to bolster her courage with the taste of his skin and a break from the silver in his stare. “And the oblivious one?” she continued, breathing the question against his neck. Despite the growing darkness, her entire body felt alight, thrumming with the heat of a star all her own. Together, they could make a constellation.

She placed one of her hands on his, the one perched at her waist. She guided him lower, over the curve of her hip and muscles in her thigh she couldn’t help but flex at the contact. Lower still, she brought his hand to the hem of her dress before beginning their ascent again. This time, with his fingers trailing along her bare flesh, Hermione had to

distract herself by kissing his neck to prevent her breath from wavering wildly against him. From her vantage point, she could see that he'd stopped breathing altogether.

She guided his hand along the skin beneath her dress, along the outside of her thigh until it came to rest at her hip. She saw the moment the recognition hit him. He swallowed, fingers immediately flexing, digging into her skin like a man dangling from the edge, his grip and nothing else keeping him from falling.

"You told me not to let Pansy pick my lingerie," she said into his ear, feeling a thrill of power replacing the nervous stutters behind her heart. "So I opted not to wear any at all."

She had no idea where he'd been keeping the return portkey. But in the next instant she was spinning across continents with him, tangled in his touch, and desperate for more.

—

Their landing was less than graceful. Rapid portkey activation from a seated position, wrapped in each other's arms, and with a few mental faculties otherwise occupied, couldn't possibly be advisable. It was honestly miraculous that Hermione didn't hit her head on the kitchen table as their impressively precise portkey dropped them straight into their foyer.

Gods dammit Theo was good.

Hermione wobbled, grateful to have landed on her feet and feeling shaky after her stumble towards the very sturdy table and chairs. She turned, Draco looked less rattled as he smoothed wrinkles that simply didn't exist from the fabric of his trousers.

When he looked up at her, evidently satisfied with the state of his clothes she had no intention of allowing him to wear much longer, she felt the tension pull taut between them. Unraveling fibers caught fire, tighter and tighter, fraying in every direction until the tension snapped. In much the same way, Hermione felt like her very bones might snap under the weight of Draco's stare.

She realized he was waiting for the last barrier between them to

crumble, waiting for her to confirm that he could have her, all of her. Confirmation that it wasn't just the wine or the wooing, but something driven by intent.

Even standing on the ledge of the unknown, wanting, *needing* to jump, the vacantness below suddenly looked like one of the familiar caverns inside her own head. She stalled, stuck in her momentum. It was time to give up, she knew that. Her caverns would remain empty of the things that once lived in them, she accepted it. She wanted to fill them with something new.

She'd been focusing on those errant thoughts, stare lost in the foreground between them and when she refocused, Draco stood directly in front of her. He didn't touch her but for a single curl wound around a knuckle. She recognized the look in his eyes, one he'd had before, in this place, in this way. It was that of a starving man, seeking satiation, and losing the fight not to reach for her flesh.

"Say the word, Granger," he breathed.

This time, she kissed him. And it wasn't a fleeting ghost of contact like the first time he'd done it; it was pressure and passion and permission.

"Take me to bed," she murmured against his lips. That last barrier, as big as the Berlin Wall, came crashing down.

He laughed against her mouth, joy mixed with his desire, as he hoisted her into his arms. His hands had already slipped beneath the hem of her dress, gripping her bare skin as he carried her to the bedroom, to their bed.

—

Sex was its own kind of magic. Not dissimilar from the kind she'd sought inside a jewelry box. The kind she'd found in Draco's face instead.

Sex with him was an exercise in the occult.

The incantations he breathed into her pores as he slipped her dress from her shoulders settled into her skin with the greed of an accidental flame, consuming her flesh.

She wrote runes with her lips, trailing across every unexplored inch of him as her unsteady hands undid the buttons of his shirt, revealing a sea of skin to quench her thirst.

The spells cast by his touch, insistent in its exploration of the places that made her sway, circled her mind and body in a whirlwind of want.

And the enchantments she conjured with heavy pants between parted lips were the only things keeping her rooted to the earth, grounded in some semblance of reality, as Draco sank into her, echoes careening through her head.

For a moment, all was still.

Then, Hermione's breath rattled on the intake. The slight expansion of her chest pressed her skin even closer to his as tiny eruptions of urgency forced an almost involuntary grinding from her hips.

Draco groaned against her neck. His teeth scraped at the vertical tendons along her throat before he lifted his head to meet her eyes. She rocked again, encouraging him to move, nearly split apart by the growing blaze ricocheting along her nerves.

He pressed a kiss to her lips, surprisingly chaste as he dragged his hips away from hers with an agonizing slowness. Hermione gasped against his mouth, threading her fingers through his hair, dragging her nails against his scalp, down his neck, and to his shoulders.

When he broke the kiss and looked at her again, she saw the glint in his eyes, the crinkle at the corners, and she knew she was done for. A Draco Malfoy smirk delivered by nothing more than a look told her everything she needed to know about how he planned to have her.

Her eyes rolled back just as his hips snapped forward, a jolt of electricity by way of magic—or was it the other way around?—crackling between them, indifferent to where one ended and the other began.

Draco pushed up, seated against his heels and still inside her as his confident, practiced hands held her by the hips to meet his every movement. She was a canvas, pulled too tightly across her frame, unraveling at the edges and coming utterly undone as she let her reflexes take control, instinct orchestrating how to be with him. She had no control over her voice, over her breathing, over her impending ruin under his touch.

Heat flushed in rapid waves across her skin and through her sinew, rushes of need she barely knew what to do with. But she knew she needed more contact, more closeness. The cool bite of room temperature air against the firestorm beneath her skin drove her to seek more touch. She reached out and, without the need for words or requests, he simply pulled her to a seated position with him, chest pressed to chest, face pressed to face, and the vacancies in her mind pressed to the memories in his, so close they might as well be one.

He slowed his pace as he held her against him: the savoring of a new position that dragged even more pleasure out of her. She moved with him, whimpering at the grit of friction as he thrust up into her, all at once entirely familiar and deliciously unknown. She clawed at his back, gripping for support as each and every fiber inside her threatened to quake and quiver and dissolve beneath sweat-slicked skin and the trail of his tongue along her breast. She remained steady only by the grace of the arm Draco had anchored around her waist, keeping her upright and perfectly positioned to meet his hips with hers.

She released a tiny, broken breath as his left hand briefly cradled her head before dipping lower, past barriers and long gone buttons and bullshite excuses to withhold such beautiful delirium from her life any longer. His hand cupped her breast in its descent, rolling a nipple between his fingers and eliciting a strangled hiss from between her teeth before continuing downward.

His hand slipped past her ribs, ghosted across her stomach, and inched closer to the nerves that would be targets to his arson.

She pressed her nails harder into his back, rolling her head forward enough to force him to meet his eyes. She had little control left, already on the precipice of a new ledge and ready, desperately so, to fall.

She only had one request as his fingers finally found their destination, wrenching pleasure from her: a thief of sighs, and gasps, and screams.

Don't be gentle with me, she'd wanted to say. She hadn't been with him, all those months ago. And she wanted the treatment repaid with interest, sweet, delicious interest delivered by quick, hard thrusts and bruising hands against her skin. But the words died in her throat, along with every coherent thought she might have had as she came undone on the crest of a pleasure peaking and crashing again and

again.

And for a moment, her mind was nothing but vacancies, enormous caverns of unknowing as her world blinked out of existence before reforming and beginning anew. A new reality at a different angle, shifted parameters granting her new perspectives as she reveled in the distinct pleasure of watching every ounce of Draco Malfoy's careful control shattering around him as he tumbled through his release mere moments after her own.

He collapsed on the bed next to her, the rapid labor of his breathing pulling her out of her own head, still empty of old memories, but filling with something else. He clung to her, and she to him, as he pressed tiny, winded kisses against her neck, her shoulder, her wrist: every inch of her that his lips could travel, they did. And her hands did the same, relearning and cataloguing every patch of his pale skin.

"I'm never leaving this bed again," Draco announced, barely a whisper between kisses.

"No?" was all Hermione could manage as she traced the long lines of his arm, over the faded Dark Mark he didn't know how to forgive himself for.

"Between you and—well, the fact that it's not that bloody sofa, I can't imagine any more perfect set of circumstances."

Perfect, indeed.

"Is it always like this?" she asked quietly, hoping to communicate the feeling of possession, of being possessed, that burned like hot coals inside her chest.

"The sex?" he asked, diverting his trail of kisses so he could level his face with hers. "Yes and no," he answered. "It's always—fantastic, but this was…"

"Magic," she supplied, flushing with embarrassment over such sentimentality. She'd never pictured herself as that kind of person, one so consumed in another that the edges between them ran and blurred.

He hummed a noise of agreement as he dropped his mouth to her ear, the barest hint of teeth toying with the lobe. Reflexes arched her body against his, reacting to his touch.

She smiled into the feeling, eyes closing. In that perfect moment,

indicative of all the time ahead of them, Hermione decided to finally put the time behind them to bed.

“Draco,” she said. He made another throaty noise against her ear, rocketing sparks through her veins. “It’s time to give up,” she said simply.

He didn’t react at first, still spoiling her with soft nips and nuzzles. Then he slowed, pulling away from his work behind her ear.

“Give what up?” he asked. The serenity on his face, present from the moment his control shattered as he came, vanished.

“The research,” she told him. “Searching for answers, hoping that my memory is just going to come back. It’s time to give up and move on.”

It was a clinical, simple, truth. They had so much more they could look forward to, if only they could move on from the past she’d already forgotten. She didn’t need her actual memories, not anymore, in order to build something new with him.

He was still, quiet, and he didn’t look at her until finally, he spoke.

“No.”

Hermione blinked. “What—what do you mean, ‘no?’”

“I mean no,” he repeated, his words solidifying in a new way, armed with conviction.

“You said you wouldn’t give up *until I told you to.* It’s time, Draco.”

“I—" he faltered. And then, as if he just realized it himself, he finished his thought. “I lied.”

He rolled away from her, staring at the ceiling, as Hermione tried to sort through what had just happened.

“You said it was my mind, my decision,” she said, voice so quiet she could barely hear it herself.

“I know I did,” he replied, volume equally as absent. “But I can’t.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“Does the difference matter?”

That burning coals inside her flared, no longer a comfortable kind of heat, but something aching and close to anger. She didn't want that, she didn't want to ruin the wonderful thing they'd just shared. But if he didn't know the difference, she needed him to learn.

"One is a matter of your skill. The other of your will."

And one was certainly worse than the other.

He didn't say anything and Hermione imagined she could hear the churning of thoughts inside his head.

"Draco?" she asked to the heavy air around them. She had her own eyes fixed on the ceiling as she tried not to let tears overtake her on the heels of what had been such a spectacular thing. Despite the new wedge between them, rendered into reality in a few short words, Hermione forced herself to be brave. Worse things had failed to break her. This would not define their evening.

"Tell me about our wedding," she said.

She heard him release a breath, neither sad nor frustrated, just held past the threshold of his normal breathing cadence. He turned towards her again, wrapping an arm around her waist as he pulled her close.

With lips pressed to her skin and a silent understanding that now was not the time to argue, he told her.

Chapter End Notes

> i love and appreciate kudos and comments if you feel so inclined to let me know what you think!! also, come hang out with me on tumblr, its a good time!
>
> art inspired by this chapter:
> Vineyard Kiss by aiivytx

Chapter 10: Abraxas Malfoy

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“The heart breaks when it has swelled too much in the warm breath of hope, then finds itself enclosed in cold reality.”

— Alexandre Dumas, The Count of Monte Cristo

—

October

Life with Draco had a certain push and pull to it. Hermione learned this relatively early into her new life with him. There was compromise, there was progress, and there were a fair few setbacks as well. But as September became October in the cold detente of their disagreement over her memory, Hermione couldn’t help but feel pulled in all directions, stretched thin with each passing day, waiting for another push or pull to send them over the edge. Because she’d realized that in the absence of her memories, there was something else she wanted. And it would likely shred the stitching holding together their careful civility, ripped to pieces by a landmine they’d yet to disarm.

The day after her birthday, Draco moved his research back out of the flat and they’d agreed, silently, not to discuss whether or not he still searched for answers. That unspoken thing between them became a third person in the room at all times: a constant stranger asking for attention but never acknowledged. Because when they could ignore their stranger, relegated to the dark corners they avoided, they could pretend to live a rather lovely life wherein Draco slept in his own bed again and Hermione wore a ring on her left hand.

She could sleep pressed against his chest, warm and solid and reminiscent of a feeling she could only describe as home.

She could begin her days by running her hands through his normally impeccable hair, utterly imprecise after a night spent against a pillow.

And she could greet her sleep with soft kisses against his lips and neck, apologies for the conversations they were ignoring, and promises that they would figure it out.

But that was as far as their intimacy went since Hermione's birthday. Another barrier had been erected by the disagreement they ignored for the sake of stretching their little bit of peace and happiness as far as they could.

Hermione could only survive in the in-between for so long.

"I want to use a pensieve," she said, sitting on the edge of the bed as Draco selected his clothes from the closet.

She anticipated he'd have objections. She didn't anticipate the way the temperature in the room plummeted in sync with the way he stilled. Every muscle, every nerve, frozen. Hermione counted her breaths, remembering the last time they'd had this conversation, so long ago.

Eventually, he moved again, turning towards her from where he stood at the closet door. She refused to back down from her words. She meant them. She'd realized this was what she needed, memories from others were the only parts of her missing time that she could know. And she wanted to know them.

She knew he didn't understand, but she needed him to. Even if her healers thought using a pensieve could harm her ability to ever regain her memories, Hermione had already accepted the loss of her memories as a permanent, irreparable part of her existence. So much so that losing even the most infinitesimal chance that they may return was worth it to her in exchange for the absolute certainty of getting to *see* what she was missing from the memories of others. A pensieve was the closest she could get to knowing her own history.

"We've talked about this," Draco said on a careful breath.

"Months ago. Things have changed."

His lips thinned, pressing together, seeking control. "I believe, at the time, I reminded you that you are far too stubborn to give up." His words sounded forced, a struggle just to speak. If fear had form, it looked very much like Draco Malfoy in that moment. He turned and continued dressing, disappearing into the closet as Hermione sat and wondered just how hard she intended to push, how much they could take.

“I’m not giving up,” she said, lifting her voice, insistent that it carried through the doorway to whatever corner of the closet he’d retreated to. “I want to try something new. I can’t keep doing the same thing without seeing a result.”

Draco emerged, dressed for work, and looking pointedly at anything in the room that wasn’t her.

“And if it hurts you? Ruins any chance of you actually getting your memories back?”

“Something is better than nothing,” she insisted. Her throat felt tight, she didn’t want to fight. She just wanted him to understand, to be on her side.

And then she saw the shard flake away, a fragment of feeling he had to discard, solidifying into something absent behind his eyes. A minute step into his Occlumency, but it was enough for Hermione to notice.

“Please—" she started.

“A pensieve is not even remotely the same thing,” he said. The layer of calm blanketing his words only served to frustrate her further. “To not know how you *felt*—"

She watched him crystallize as his words failed, further freezing her out. “I have to go to work,” he concluded. A coward’s exit. A shockingly sudden retreat.

Before she could demand that they face this, that he let her explain, that they do so without the Occlumency they’d worked so hard to avoid, he apparated away with the barest hint of a grimace peeking through the fragments that had become him.

Furious, frustrated, Hermione finally rose from the foot of the bed and walked to the kitchen where, for the first time since she woke up at St. Mungo’s ten months earlier, she made her own morning tea.

—

“So are you two still fighting?” Harry asked from the door to

Hermione's miserable Ministry office. "That's some pretty aggressive marking you're doing. If I didn't know better, I'd think it's one of my potions essays."

Hermione looked up at her friend, at that teasing glint in his green eyes trying to bring her some levity, and offered him a weak smile.

"We're not fighting," she said.

"You're not *not* fighting," Harry concluded with that unfortunate sense of knowing that came from sussing out lies for a living. He sat in the small chair crammed into the corner of the room. "Care to grab lunch with me today?" he asked. "I have something I want to tell you."

"Can't, lots of reports to proofread. Just tell me here." She didn't look at him when she said it, but she could feel him watching her, assessing for the lie they both knew she'd told. The only acknowledgment Harry gave her was a quiet, disbelieving noise.

Hermione sighed. "We're just—agreeing to disagree right now. Alright?"

Rather than looking relieved that she'd finally engaged him, Harry turned nervous. He raked a hand through his messy hair, a constant in unsteady times if there ever was one.

"Ginny has told me I have to ask about the..." his voice trailed off, quiet, and whatever word he'd meant to end that sentence with got lost in the ambient white noise of the wards and charms that protected Ministry property.

Harry's demeanor only made Hermione uneasy.

"About the what, Harry?" she prompted, preparing herself for a blow from Ginny, delivered by Harry.

"About the sex and whether it's—still happening." Harry groaned. "I am earning myself so much goodwill with my wife right now. Please feel free to not answer that question."

"You think Ginny will rest without her answers?" Hermione asked, torn between painful mortification and a swell of amusement. Harry looked more uncomfortable than she felt, which helped.

"I'd prefer she Floo to you herself and ask them instead of using me as an owl."

Hermione smiled, wondering what reason Ginny had given Harry to force him to inquire about her sex life in absentia.

“Tell Ginny no, it was just the one time. But he’s been sleeping in the bed.”

For as uncomfortable as Harry looked, brows pulled together, fidgeting with his knuckles, and bouncing one leg at a distractingly rapid pace, Hermione had to give the man credit for trying.

“So that’s—good?” he ventured.

“It’s—not bad,” she said. Hermione sighed again and set down her quill. She gathered the parchments on her desk and placed them neatly in her files, accepting her impending participation in an informal interrogation from Harry.

“I asked him to stop researching my case,” Hermione said. She hadn’t told Ginny, she couldn’t bring herself in the days following what had been both one of the best and worst birthdays of Hermione’s life. But now, with Harry and nearly a month of time to think, she could do it. “My healers have stopped looking into alternative causes and cures.” She sucked in a breath, determined to keep her voice even. “I don’t think I’m ever going to get my memories back, Harry.”

She held up a hand to halt the response she saw him preparing.

“I’ve accepted it. I’m trying to move on. But Draco—he’s having some trouble with my decision.”

Whatever Harry had planned to say evidently died on his lips. He pressed his mouth together. Hermione sometimes forgot that Harry, of everyone she knew, was an expert at receiving bad news, at processing it on the fly and reacting accordingly. It was a skill best forged in the fires of learning that one had to die, accepting it, and going to do it anyway. Some of her anxiety softened as she watched him process her words.

“So you two *are* fighting, then?” he concluded, looking at her for confirmation.

“Not exactly. We’re mostly not talking about it, bit of a compromise by silence,” she said. “I asked for some memories to use a pensieve this morning and that—well, he wasn’t fond of that idea.”

“But if your healers aren’t—" Harry started.

“They’ve kept my care plan the same, which means no pensieves, technically. But I think we’re past that now, don’t you?” she asked. “I actually wanted to ask you—and Ginny, if you could give me some memories.”

Harry seemed taken aback, eyes widening briefly before he neutralized his features, a skill that Auror training had given him. Years ago, he’d have been utterly wide-eyed and staring at her with open disbelief. It had taken her most of the last ten months to recognize this new skill in him, refined in her missing six years.

“I don’t—‘Mione I don’t know if I’m comfortable with that,” he said after some time.

“Harry, I would like to see some of the important events in my life if I can’t remember them myself,” she said, trying not to snap. She could feel a repeat of the same conversation she’d had with Draco just that morning creeping up on her. Same song, different key.

“But if your healers don’t think it’s safe—if Draco doesn’t—"

“Draco doesn’t get to make decisions about *my* health,” Hermione insisted, her tone wavering between indignant and nasty. Belatedly, she wondered if that was the first time she’d ever heard Harry call Draco anything other than Malfoy.

Despite her shortness, Harry laughed.

“He made all kinds of decisions about your health when you were unconscious in St. Mungo’s. That’s part of the job when you’re married to someone, you know.” He’d said it on the tail end of his disbelieving laugh, a bit of amusement still bleeding through, but there was a seriousness to it that caught Hermione off guard. She didn’t have it in her to consider the validity or implication of his words. Because she knew he wasn’t wrong.

“My healers only forbade pensieve use over concerns it would inhibit my ability to regain my actual memories. Harry, they’re not coming back. It’s—I’m ready to move on. I don’t need to have the memories, but I’d at least like to *see* them to some extent.” She felt her control over her voice slipping, starting to waver. Her throat tightened, frustrated and desperate to make him understand, to make Draco understand, for them all to understand that she was tired. So, so tired of not knowing.

The look of pity that flashed across Harry’s face made Hermione want

to crawl under her desk and hide. She clenched her fists, nails biting into her palms in an attempt to quell the sting of frustrated tears she desperately didn't want to shed.

Harry stood and crossed her small office, pulling her into a hug against his chest as he stood beside her.

"I'm sorry," he told her, holding her the way he had in all the worst moments in Hermione's life. Moments marred by wars and death and fear and grief. "You remember all the times you told me to go to Dumbledore about something? Or listen to reason? Or be cautious? I should have listened to you. It took me too long to figure that out. I reckon it could have saved some lives if I'd listened sooner." His voice, somewhere above her head, felt heavy with the things he couldn't change. "I should have listened to you because you have amazing judgement. You're so rational—logical. You make good decisions."

He sighed and released her from his supportive hug.

"I don't think this is a good decision, 'Mione."

She met his gaze, grateful that he cared so much, but her mind was already made up.

"But it's my decision to make," she told him, feeling spent of the frustration that had propelled her through her morning.

Harry still had his hands on her shoulders. He gave them a squeeze for support. He watched her, studied her longer than she might have expected before he spoke. "Just don't do anything I would have done."

He offered her a closed-lipped smile, tight and wary as he turned to leave. He paused at the door to her small office. He knocked a couple of times at the frame, a thinking action as he debated something with himself. Hermione watched with curiosity.

"What I wanted to tell you," he started. "Well, what Ginny and I wanted to tell you, actually. But she's at home, been feeling under the weather—she usually does. In the first trimester." He looked at her with a flash of pride behind his eyes. "We're having a third."

—

Harry's departure left Hermione feeling uneasy, uncomfortable, and unmoored in a way she hadn't been since the first few months without her memories, when everything felt too new, too unusual, too much. The riot of emotions battering at her bones turned her stomach and had her feeling the beginnings of a headache coming on. She couldn't quite parse the intensity of the things she felt from the actual emotions: something like joy or longing or jealousy swelling in her chest.

With a growing headache to match her overall sense of frustration, Hermione doubled down on her request for memories. If Harry wouldn't help her, perhaps the Slytherins in her life could be convinced. She sent owls to Pansy and Theo, asking if they could meet Hermione at her flat.

And then, for the first time in her professional career, kidnapping by Theo excluded, Hermione skived off work with a weak excuse to her boss about her headache. Her boss's only response was a brief nod and a wave of her hand. They both knew that Hermione's work mattered very little to very few.

The next thing on Hermione's list of things to do in order to take back her life would be returning to her old job. Or at the very least, a different job altogether. Because if she had to spend much longer in her closet of an office proofreading reports for every gods damned department in the Ministry she was going to lose her mind. And frankly, she didn't have much left to spare.

Hermione apparated back to her flat once she'd exited the Ministry wards and immediately began rummaging around the kitchen for something to dull her headache. A hesitant knock at the door interrupted her search.

Hermione paused, head tilted to the side, eyes on the door, uncertain she'd actually heard anything at all. She approached. It was so rare that anyone actually used the front door to the flat that the unusualness of it made her nervous.

"I'm not doing it again, Theo. It felt downright plebeian doing it just the once." Pansy's voice carried through the door with a sharp, irritated grate.

Hermione heard an annoyed groan from Theo, followed by a much louder knock that startled Hermione with its force. She swung the door open to find the two Slytherin's on the other side. Theo still had

a hand raised, clearly intent on continuing his knocking.

“What are you doing?” Hermione asked.

Pansy swept into the flat with a not-so-unintentional feeling shove as she squeezed by Hermione.

Theo’s brow furrowed, still standing outside.

“You locked us out of the wards, remember?” he said.

Hermione flushed. She hadn’t remembered. In fact, with everything competing for her limited discretionary mental energy over the last month, the fact that she’d removed their access to her wards had completely slipped her mind.

“So, to what do I owe such a gracious summons?” Pansy asked in an acerbic tone. She sat with her legs crossed in the leather wingback in the living room. She had her arms folded in front of her, lacquered nails drumming impatiently against her arms. “I do have things to do throughout the day, I hope you realize. And you haven’t bothered to show up to Fridays in almost a month so I don’t see why you suddenly think you can just demand my presence—"

“Merlin, Pansy, give her a chance to explain before you read her sentence,” Theo chided as he found a place for himself on the other, larger armchair in the room, leaving the sofa for Hermione.

Hermione gave them a wary look, suddenly feeling far less confident in how this conversation might go.

Crookshanks hopped into Theo’s lap, greedily accepting affection.

“You have good timing, Granger. I need to borrow your cat,” he said as he summoned a treat from the kitchen.

“That’s not really how pets work, Theo.”

“I’m aware. But Blaise mentioned I might be getting a cat soon so I wanted to take Crookshanks for a whirl at the manor and see how it worked out.”

Hermione’s head tilted as far as she could manage it under her confusion.

“What do you mean Blaise said you might get one—"

Pansy interrupted with a roll of her eyes and a frustrated huff. “He’s got a touch of seer on his mother’s side. Completely useless; only occasionally says something interesting. But Theo can’t let this cat idea go.”

“So you just want to—babysit my cat? For how long?”

“Blaise didn’t say, probably just a couple of days. Get a feel for life with a cat.”

Hermione watched Crookshanks, clearly enamored with his Slytherin friend.

“You’d have to give him real meals, not just treats,” Hermione warned.

Evidently, that was all the permission Theo needed. He looked thrilled in his victory.

“Now back to the matter at hand,” Theo continued. “There must be something important on your mind if you’re voluntarily calling on us.”

He didn’t exactly say it in a tone that suggested he was annoyed. Truth be told, Hermione had no idea what Theo looked or sounded like when he was upset. But something about what he said and how he said it forced the sharp realization that Hermione hadn’t, not once, ever reached out to either of them to seek their company on her own volition. Whenever they spent time together it had been at their initiation, or by way of their Friday night gatherings.

With a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach, Hermione realized just how selfish that made her.

“Oh,” escaped her lips as she sank further back onto the sofa.

Pansy let out a small laugh from her place across the room.

“Honestly, I’m impressed you read that subtext,” Pansy said, standing, before she crossed the room to join Hermione on the sofa. Hermione saw Theo grimacing in the background, distaste for the green piece of furniture evident as always.

And as if the matter of Hermione’s offense was entirely settled, Pansy spoke, “how can we be of service, Granger?”

“Perhaps it has something to do with the fight Draco insists they are

definitely not having," Theo posited.

Pansy made a thoughtful noise from beside Hermione.

"Could be," she agreed. "You know, Theo, I've even heard Draco's sleeping in his own bed again."

"In his own bed, you say? But Pansy, what on earth could that mean?" Theo exclaimed in feigned shock.

Hermione found herself held captive as the production between the two Slytherins unfolded in front of her.

"Hard to say, Theo. You see, my lingerie expertise has yet to be called upon." And with that, Pansy lobbed a heavily arched brow in Hermione's direction.

And despite feeling like a sorry excuse for a friend, Hermione couldn't help but smirk at the show Theo and Pansy had just put on. Whether for their own amusement or to offer her their own twisted Slytherin version of forgiveness, she couldn't say. But she'd learned enough from them to have some idea of how to play along.

"That's because I didn't wear any," Hermione finished for Pansy with a knowing smile.

It was like Hermione had given Pansy the greatest gift she could imagine. Her face lit up and she launched herself at Hermione in a brief, but powerful hug.

"Oh, I am so proud of you. Now, I need to hear all about the sex." Pansy rubbed her hands together in an exaggerated motion, clearly desperate for details. Hermione flushed, uncomfortable heat and redness creeping up her neck and face.

Theo made a choking noise from across the room.

"Please don't, I know too much about your sex life as it is." And for a moment, Theo reminded Hermione so strongly of Harry that it was almost comical. Dark hair, styled differently, but both with green eyes, an irreverence for rules when they were an inconvenience, and a habit of walking in on Hermione and Draco in compromising situations. It was no wonder she found him so likable; he and Harry had more in common than either probably would have liked to admit.

"That's not why I asked you here." Hermione forced herself to speak

through her mortification. Pansy and Theo each had very different, simultaneous reactions.

“Pity,” from Pansy.

“Thank fuck,” from Theo.

“I was actually hoping I could get some memories from each of you to use in a pensieve. Memories of me and Draco that is, Friday nights, our wedding—if you were there, I mean—were you—there?” Hermione’s train of thought came to a screeching halt out of added mortification and a new flush of frustration. She didn’t even know if the two people in front of her, some of the closest people in her new life, had been at her wedding. Even after having heard the story from Draco, while he had his lips against her shoulder, muttering about her dress and her hair and their vows as he held her in the tainted afterglow on her birthday; she hadn’t thought to ask for specifics of the guest list.

And that was just one of what could only be thousands of details that made hearing about her past simply not enough. Nice as it was to hear, she wanted to see. Draco could only tell her so much, remember so much.

Theo and Pansy spoke simultaneously once again.

“Yes, we were at your wedding,” from Theo, with a mixed sort of expression on his face: one part pity, one part fondness.

“Fuck no, I’m not giving you memories,” from Pansy, with honestly more outrage than Hermione felt the situation required.

Hermione offered Theo a small nod of acknowledgment and appreciation for the answer to her question before turning to Pansy.

“I take it Draco has warned you off giving me memories as well?” she asked, unable to keep the edge of a bite out of her tone. She’d already been thwarted by Harry, which meant Ginny by extension, too. Now Pansy Parkinson of all people wanted to play by Draco’s rules?

Theo cut in with an answer just as Pansy opened her mouth to spit what looked like even more venom in Hermione’s direction. Once a snake, always a snake, one could suppose.

“That’s not fair to Draco, Granger. We’ve all had the rundown on your treatment plan as relevant parties in your life.” The fondness on his

face has slipped away, but the pity was still there. Theo wrangled Crookshanks, who'd attempted an escape from his lap. Temporarily mollified, he cradled the cat as Pansy watched with a sneer.

"I'm not getting my memories back," Hermione said. She wondered how many times she'd have to say it before the people around her believed it.

"Is Ginny giving you memories?" Pansy inquired from beside her.

Hermione hesitated. At first, she was confused by the question. But when Pansy's motives fell into place, Hermione had let too much time pass to formulate a response that could get her what she wanted.

"So she's not," Pansy concluded from the silence. "Gods dammit, Granger. I could pull ahead if I gave you some, couldn't I? You'd like me more. Because this matters to you?"

Pansy shushed the warning sound from Theo, who'd lifted Crookshanks and almost looked as if he was attempting to posture the cat as a Pansy-specific weapon.

"I'm not going to do it, Theo. But I'm put out about it okay? And you"—she turned her attention back to Hermione, pointing a single, nearly black nail at her—"I am extremely cross with you. I very much dislike doing the right thing, especially when it actively works against my best interests. But—Granger, until your healers say it's safe, I won't do it."

Surely Hermione had crossed into a different reality where Pansy Parkinson had limits, and a backbone, and some kind of warped code of ethics that, of all times, came into play when Hermione needed it not to.

Theo rose suddenly, Crookshanks still in his arms.

"Look, Granger," he started, evidently preparing for his departure with her cat. She didn't have the mental energy to dissuade him on the matter, absurd as it was. "You've hidden illegal items for me," his eyes flicked to the locked and warded guest room. "I owe you. And it might not seem like it right now, but I think this is me paying you back."

Hermione let her head fall into her hands with a frustrated groan, once again on the verge of angry tears, exhausted from being constantly at odds with everyone in her life.

Pansy stood and, for a blink-and-you-miss-it kind of moment, let her manicured hand rest on Hermione's shoulder. There was a soft squeeze followed by a quiet "that skirt's fucking hideous" and then she'd walked away, following Theo out the door.

—

Hermione apparated with a soft *pop* outside the front of Draco's potions shop at the edge of Knockturn Alley. The workday had almost wound to a close and she'd been restless without her research, her cat, or the people in her life who seemed so insistent they were doing her a favor by ignoring her requests. So rather than sit at the kitchen table, staring at the bowl of apple-flavored sweets on the counter and wanting for understanding no one seemed able to give her, she opted for action.

She entered the shop, tense nerves jumping at the soft tinkling above the door that announced her entrance. She'd yet to visit, and the lovely little shop took her by surprise: ready to purchase potions lined shelves near the front, and towards the back were advertisements for custom and bulk orders. It certainly didn't have the grandeur of something she might have once expected from a Malfoy, but it still bore the hallmarks of Draco's fastidious organization and penchant for an understated but elegant aesthetic. She couldn't help the pride she felt, looking around the shop that, at this hour in the early evening, was blessedly devoid of clients. Witnesses were not required for her second attempt at this conversation.

Hermione's heart caught against her ribs when Draco emerged from a room attached at the back of the shop, clearly expecting a customer and finding her instead. His features lit up with a smile, warm and welcoming. And then, as if the memory of their argument that morning had stepped out of the room behind him, just a pace slower, a coldness slammed over his features.

"Are you busy?" Hermione asked, not knowing how else to greet him.

"Been a slow day," he said. He nodded for her to follow him back behind the scenes to whatever inner workings the shop required to run. Passing through the door between the two spaces, Hermione found a much different situation kept out of view of the public.

Multiple cauldrons were brewing at once, all in different stages of completion, some bubbling, some simmering, others looking completely chilled. The sharp competition of various scents took Hermione a moment to process as the fumes mixed and swirled in the air. Her eyes widened at the sight of the ingredients, jars upon jars lining the shelved walls in an impressive collection rivaled in Hermione's memory only by Professor Snape's stores at Hogwarts.

And then there were the books, scattered everywhere and in a much different way than the collection in their flat. This was haphazard, panicked almost. A veritable biblio-explosion that included, for reasons that stalled Hermione's brain mid-thought, Blaise Zabini with his feet propped up on a table, reading a muggle book on concussive brain trauma.

Blaise glanced over the top of the book as she took in the sight: he looked either unsurprised or unamused, similar expressions on his face, she'd found.

"You work here?" she asked Blaise, lacking the capacity to address anything else in front of her.

Draco seemed intent on busying himself with a rather aggressively bubbling cauldron.

"In a sense," Blaise responded, not looking up from the book.

Hermione turned to Draco, seeking further explanation.

"He owns it," Draco said with a small sigh, switching from a clockwise to an anti-clockwise stir. "Most of it at least, he's my primary investor."

Blaise, evidently, had no comment on the matter.

"You know Blaise, Theo kidnapped Crookshanks today. Have any insight on that?"

For a fraction of a second, Draco stopped stirring. He quickly remembered himself and continued his ministrations, but it was long enough for Hermione to register his surprise.

"Theo has our cat?" Draco asked with a frown.

Blaise snapped the book in his hands shut, kicking his feet off the table, and standing in a successive series of smooth movements. He

gave a small shrug.

“He’s thinking of getting his own,” Blaise said. He set the book on the table with the others, clearly the place where all Draco’s research had moved. “I have no interest in whatever conversation you two need to have, so I’ll be leaving,” he said.

Draco didn’t acknowledge his friend apart from the small huff breaking his concentration as he added a new ingredient to the cauldron.

Blaise paused as he stepped by Hermione, just long enough for a single sentence, below his breath and likely inaudible to Draco on the other side of the room. “If I could make an observation. He’s scared too, Granger.”

Blaise continued his exit, passing through the door back out into the main shop before the quiet bells announced his complete departure.

Draco released a sigh upon Blaise’s exit and cast a stasis charm on his cauldrons.

“I should apologize for this morning,” he offered as Hermione took a step towards the table completely littered in books about memory. She picked one at random and examined it as she leaned against the frame, facing Draco across the small room.

“I didn’t realize you had this much research,” she said. She recognized some of the books as those he brought to their flat and subsequently removed after their disagreement. But others were new to her and, if she had to guess, were likely part of his extensive personal library on the subject.

“Perhaps I’m more desperate than you thought.” He had one hand pressed flat to the edge of the table where he worked, a kind of personal anchor in unsteady waters.

Doubt crept into Hermione’s mind, seeping through her skin and soaking into her bones. She’d felt certain, not so long ago, that the memories didn’t matter to him, that she could be enough with or without them. But faced with this small arsenal of research and such an admission of desperation, she couldn’t help but wonder.

She swallowed her fear as it nearly cracked her in half. She forced herself to face it head-on.

“I’d hoped it didn’t matter to you that I couldn’t remember,” she said, self-doubt licking at the raw edges of her fear. “But you can’t let her go, can you? Who I was before.” Her arms instinctively crossed around her middle, even as she recognized the defensiveness in her posture, she couldn’t stop herself from engaging in the act of self-comfort. In a quiet voice, hating to say it, having to say it: “Could you ever?”

At first, a dark look crossed Draco’s face, something furious, freezing, as her words traveled the space between them. She could see the hurt and the anger but then, as if physically forced from his countenance, he shifted.

Draco raised anchor, crossing the sea between them, and nearly crushed her with a hug. One hand snaked behind her head, holding her close to him. She felt the precarious rise and fall of his chest against her cheek, his breath uneven against her curls. It was a hug so similar and yet so different from the one Harry had given her earlier that same day.

“Is that how I’ve made you—gods, *fuck* I never meant—" His brain and his words appeared at odds.

It took Hermione a moment to react, surprised by his sudden melting, but she wrapped her arms around his midsection, seeking healing in the thing she needed healing from.

“I’m sorry, Hermione,” he whispered against the side of her face. Of all the differences between this Draco and the one she’d known before all this happened, his ability to apologize, to own the consequences to his actions and words, stole her breath like none other.

“That’s not why, not at all,” he continued, pulling back.

She looked up at him, willing him to understand.

“I don’t need you to save me,” she told him. “I’m accepting this.”

His hands found her left arm. Her brows furrowed as he pushed her sleeve to the elbow, fingers delicately tracing the skin of her forearm, free of the slur that once lived there.

“I know you don’t—you don’t need anyone to save you.” He wasn’t looking at her, just tracing her arm with light fingertips, setting fires against her will. He took a small breath and Hermione’s heart dropped, a fearful anticipation. “We’re partners in this. I know you don’t need the memories but I just—I have to give you the choice.” He

gave a tiny, almost nonexistent shrug. “I can’t help it.”

Another echo, so keen and close. For a moment, Hermione could feel the letters carved into her skin again, soothed by his soft touch, erased by his improbable devotion.

It wasn’t the reasoning she expected, but she could understand it. She reached out to stop his tracing of letters that were no longer there.

“This *is* my choice,” she said. “I want to take back what little of my past I can. If I could at least see some of it—"

Draco’s hands found her face, cradling her jaw as he stepped even closer, pressing her against the table. His face crumpled, agony in every line.

“But if it hurts you…” he trailed off. One of his hands trailed along her temple, fear and reverence fused at odd angles, a struggle to find balance.

“Please,” Hermione begged, finally losing some of her own control, painfully aware of how much such a moment without it reminded her of what she asked of Draco on a regular basis. “I’m desperate, too,” she said. Another echo, of his words this time. “What were we doing this time last year? You know because you remember, I only know because I’ve been told or because I have sex scheduled in a planner. That’s just—it’s not enough. If I can’t remember it, can’t I at least see it?” She hadn’t meant to let so much out, to spill so many of the things that rattled and rolled in the vacancies inside her head. But once she’d started, she couldn’t stop it. “I want to see when we decided we wanted a family. Or our first kiss. I want to see us dance at Harry and Ginny’s wedding and not just in a four second loop in a photograph.”

Her chest heaved, vision blurred, a blink from crying.

Warm hands bracketed her face. Draco’s stare, when he looked at her, contained no ice, no whirlpools, no mercury, only a sense of home.

“I don’t want to fight,” she said, forcing a steadiness into her tone. He gave the smallest shake of his head before he dropped even closer to her, trapping her hands against his chest.

“I don’t either,” he said. Where Hermione had regained some control in her tone, some of his seemed to slip. His words came out stiff and tight, as if forced through a gauntlet in their release.

“Do I have a chance without them?” he asked quietly.

“A chance at what?”

“To convince you to love me again. Even if you don’t remember the first time.”

Hermione was grateful for their closeness, for the sturdiness of his body pressed against hers, pinning her hips to the table behind them. Because without that support, she might have stumbled under the unexpected sadness that overtook her. She had her doubts, and apparently he had his.

“Oh, Draco,” she whispered, desperate with the instinct to kiss him. She closed the minuscule space and pressed her lips to his, holding their faces close. “That’s what makes this so hard,” she continued between her tiny kisses of reassurance. Warmth enveloped her as one of his hands found the base of her neck, tangling in her hair the way she loved. *Loved.* “You’ve already convinced me to love you, and it’s made me greedy and selfish because all I can think about is how much I want to know every moment we’ve ever had—"

Draco’s mouth consumed whatever other confessions she might have had, a sharp divergence from the gentle, reassuring kisses she’d offered. His was desperate, relieved, and sent shocks of heat racing beneath her skin. The temperature between them had been so cold, so stagnant in their avoidance of the issue: this new heat brought her hunger out its dormancy.

She pulled at his work robes, the lack of space between them still felt like too much. If there was room for air, or doubt, or thought, then there was too much distance. She couldn’t help the whimper that broke free on a shaky breath as he disentangled his hands from her hair and her neck, picking her up by the waist and sitting her on the table.

Draco, named for a dragon in the stars, breathed fire directly into her lungs as Hermione wrapped her legs around his hips, hands dropping to his belt. She’d had such a small taste of him once before and had been starving ever since, dragged over hot coals without purpose or direction. He groaned, reaching for her *fucking hideous* skirt and shoving it up around her hips.

Hermione may not have pursued a NEWT in Astronomy, but she’d received an O on her OWLS, and she knew enough about the constellation for which Draco was named to recall that it contained an

unusual number of binary stars, constantly in orbit of each other.

That thought, of how appropriate such a fact was when she felt trapped in an orbit with him and completely disinterested in escaping, rocketed through her consciousness when he divested her of her knickers and, in a thrust that stole the air from her lungs, brought them together for the first time in a month, the second time in her memory. His mouth latched onto her neck, frantic fingers struggling to unbutton her blouse. The table beneath her rocked, sending towers of literature about missing memories clattering to the ground.

She held tight to his shoulders, a thundering in her chest predictably following the lightning strike in his touch.

“I’ll stop,” he breathed against her ear, dropping kisses on every patch of skin he could find. “You’re enough, in any iteration. You have to know that.” His words came out heavy, panted as he rocked against her. Hermione swallowed, trying to form words in a throat run dry, ragged from rapid breathing. She found his eyes as another series of books scattered against the floor, research abandoned. How she could ever have doubted, brief as it was, when he looked at her like *that,* touched her like *this.*

“I know,” she said, pulling to meet his mouth, desperate to taste him, lost to the thundering behind her ribs. One of his hands fell to grip the table beside her, seeking stability as his other arm wound around her lower back, pulling them as close as space and time and physics would allow. Gods, to be trapped in a degrading orbit with him, gravity ripping her fears to shreds, with the promise of oblivion in her destruction.

She sucked in a breath, writhing in a cage of her own flesh, as she came at the behest of his knowing touch, of hands that knew and loved and worshipped her. And as he tumbled after her, a stuttering of breath against her lips as he held his face to hers, Hermione couldn’t help but think what small things their disagreements were when compared to the cosmic. And how a man named for a constellation couldn’t be expected to operate on any other scale.

It struck her with the same force as the lightning he’d used to electrify her; he could give her everything or he could give her nothing, there could be no in-between. And that meant he had to give her every choice, even when she’d already chosen one. It bore no reflection of his respect of her wishes, but more a reflection of the only way he knew to care.

She held him, regaining control over her breathing, and finding an echo of understanding somewhere in the depths of her mind.

She let out a soft laugh when they came apart, righting their clothes, as her eyes landed on the books they'd sent crashing all over the floor.

"This was not how I expected this conversation to go," she admitted, feeling a sense of comfort cushioning her.

Draco looked up from where he'd been fastening his belt. Perhaps unprepared for the look on her face, he leaned forward with a renewed urgency, capturing her lips for another brief, but bruising kiss.

"I love you," he said against her mouth. Then, still hovering close, "I'm terrified of losing more of you." His hand, against the back of her neck, gave a possessive squeeze, as if willing her to understand through touch in the same way she willed him to understand through words.

"I know," she said. "I am too. But it's not just the parts of my life with you that I want to see. I want to see my reaction to Pansy Parkinson waltzing into my life. And all of Blaise's idiotic attempts at flirting. And all ridiculous things I've done to protect Theo and his collection of illegal objects. Chimera eggs and time turners included—"

Draco had his eyes closed, clearly warring with himself. The pressure of his hand on her neck remained a constant, comforting touch as an idea lit up the inside of her head with the suddenness of a star rendering itself into existence: a fusion of different elements into something entirely new.

"The guest room—" she started.

Draco let out a small laugh. "That might not be the worst thing to forget, you didn't especially enjoy seeing parts of my clavicle poking through my skin."

"We flipped the room," she continued, ignoring his comment. "Smashed everything, you said."

"A complete wreck," he agreed, pulling away to look at her face from a distance further than the space between their lips. "Potions, sand, glass, splinters. Everything in that room got completely shattered, why?"

“Was it just once? Flipping the room, did we do it just once?”

Draco sighed. “Gods no, it was awful. One might have been alright. We flipped it five, maybe six times.”

Five. Maybe six.

Maybe six times for six missing years.

For the first time since January, the dark, empty caverns in her mind had a light shined on them: the bright light of a new idea.

“I have to go,” she said, feeling high on a preemptive sense of discovery. She kissed him through the confused look he gave her, hovering just long enough to whisper, “I love you,” before apparating back to their flat.

—

Back in the empty flat, Hermione eyed the door to the room she’d nearly forgotten existed. She walked by it every day, casting it out of her mind as an extraneous detail because it existed outside her reality. It was a place she had no need to see, a place they’d been considering making unplottable because of the danger it posed, the danger it had already caused.

But Jenkins, *Jenkins* of all people, had posited the existence of something else, something in addition to the physical trauma she experienced that could explain the neat lines and hard border to the losses in her memory. Something that could target a specific stretch of time in her mind. Something like sand, shattered from an illegal time turner, and combined with all manner of experimental magic, flipped six times.

Hermione dismantled the wards to the guest room with barely any effort. They were never truly meant to keep her out, never stood any semblance of a chance, whether Draco knew it or not. She’d always had the power to enter. The only thought that gave her pause was the matter of her choice. She didn’t know what she’d find inside but she knew, given the choice, she’d rather have something over nothing. And something waited for her on the other side of that door, that much she knew.

She opened the door and entered, closing it behind her.

A moment later, an explosion erupted from within the guest room, barreling outward, far worse than any landmine.

The blast careened towards the kitchen and the living room, where, in a show worthy of a supernova, it obliterated everything in its path: cabinets and counters, tables and chairs, and tufted green velvet sofas included.

—

A patch of velvet, deep emerald green and incinerating in the heat of unexpected flames: the exact spot where Abraxas Malfoy's fingers brushed the object in a passing moment of assessment as the piece of ornate furniture was delivered to Malfoy Manor.

A tufting button, jettisoned by the sheer force of explosion: twice pried from the sofa by a bored Lucius Malfoy. Twice repaired by obedient house elves. Twice the source of a caning. A lesson in respect of property from a father to a son.

A stretch of fabric, ripped from a cushion panel by flying fragments of drywall: home to a vanished wartime stain, blood mingled with bile. Evidence of a time when the sofa and its residence played host to all manner of unsavory things.

A separate patch of velvet, from a bit now colliding with the buckling front door to the flat: the place where tears once fell and eventually dried. Where Draco Malfoy held Hermione Granger in his arms for the first time.

A fracturing wooden leg, glowing red in the heat of the inferno around it: the same that supported his weight the first time that Draco stole a barely-there kiss from the woman he'd one day wed.

A stretch of cushion, disintegrating in an unfathomable blaze: the backdrop for the first time he tasted her, head buried between thighs, cautiously straddling the narrow divide between lust and love.

A rolled arm, shattering into many smaller pieces under the force of detonation: where Theodore Nott found his friends, half-naked,

engaged in activities he could have gone a lifetime without seeing.

A chunk of cotton stuffing, alight and drifting in the smoky haze of a settling eruption: the exact cushioning Hermione sank into after winning a ridiculous bet transferring the ownership of the furniture to her.

A thread of stitching, holding nothing together after disassembly by force of ignition: the same thread Hermione pulled at during the fight that broke them apart, sending the sofa to its current and final resting place in her new home, separate from his.

A splintered wooden frame, shattered and smoldering on the ground: where they came together again, agreeing on forever as the only length of time that would be enough.

Shards of life.

Echoes and memories.

Blown apart.

Chapter End Notes

i love and appreciate kudos and comments if you feel so inclined to let me know what you think!! also, come hang out with me on tumblr, its a good time!

Chapter 11: Harry Potter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Remember that what has once been done may be done again.”

— Alexandre Dumas, The Count of Monte Cristo

—

November

Bright lights and lime green.

Hermione’s head ached. A vice grip squeezed at her neurons, wringing her mind dry. She screwed her eyes shut as a small noise of pain slipped from her throat.

“That’s it, Hermione, take it slow, dear. Jenkins, lower the lights.”

A familiar voice. A name scuttled across brain matter, seeking destination in recognition. Pops and bursts of light waxed and waned behind Hermione’s eyelids, still closed tight. Her pulse pounded behind her sinuses, shooting through her eye sockets.

“When you’re ready,” the voice said again, quieter now, “try opening your eyes.”

Hermione allowed the muscles in her face to relax, a prelude to separating sealed lids. They fluttered, fully opened, and then closed again in a screaming blink of agony. Such bright lights. So much lime green. Such an assaulting color in a place meant to soothe and heal.

St. Mungo’s. She was in St. Mungo’s. Echoes called out from the depths of her memory. She answered them in confusion, knowing the sound they made, the shape of their call, but lacking the ability to translate them into coherent thought.

She’d been here before.

“Try lowering the lights again,” the familiar voice said.

The pressure in Hermione’s head began to settle. She felt a potion at her lips.

“Drink this,” the voice said. Sweet Merlin, more relief from the pressure.

Her mind began to calm, finally able to think without a garrote of pain cutting off all her thoughts. Slowly, she began sorting between the things she knew, the things she felt, and the things she had the mental acuity to process in that moment.

“Hermione, you’re exciting a magically induced coma. You’re in St. Mungo’s and you are completely safe, please try to remain calm.”

Past and present, memory and reality: colliding inside her head. She’d heard this before.

“Healer Lucas?” Hermione asked through a croak. She coughed, finally forcing her eyes open. She blinked away the impulse to slam them shut again. She heard Healer Lucas release a small breath.

“Jenkins is here as well,” she said, gesturing towards her apprentice in a seat by the door. The familiarity of the scene sent Hermione reeling for a moment, suddenly unsure of her own reality. “We’d like to perform some initial diagnostics if you’re feeling well enough.”

Hermione nodded, an unfamiliar and inappropriate thrill shooting through her. She could get these questions right.

Healer Lucas procured a slip of parchment, locked soft eyes with Hermione, and began.

“Do you know your full name?”

“Hermione Jean Granger-Malfoy.”

The pounding from Hermione’s head had shifted to her chest, a familiar thunder behind her ribs as Healer Lucas made note of her answer on the parchment.

“And do you know what year it is?”

“2007.”

“And the month?”

That caught Hermione off guard.

“October?” she answered as a question of her own, connecting that if she felt uncertain, she must not know.

Healer Lucas made another couple of notes.

“And who is the Minister for Magic?”

“Kingsley Shacklebolt,” Hermione said, confidence bolstered. But her head swam again, a headache already resurfacing. She felt her brows pulling together. She squinted in pain against the already low light.

“And—" Healer Lucas hesitated, looking at Hermione with a sense of fondness unusual for the consummate professional. “Do you have any memory of the events in your life from the middle of 2001 to the end of 2006?”

Hermione felt suddenly like she might throw up, a sense of fear and guilt and failure roiling her insides as her gaze wandered from Healer Lucas to Healer Jenkins, back and forth with tears welling in her eyes. In a strange sense of obligation, she felt like she’d failed them somehow.

She shook her head. The most difficult refutation of her life. *No.*

Healer Lucas set her parchments aside. “Perhaps that’s enough for now dear. We can continue our evaluation after you’ve had more rest.”

Hermione nodded. A shooting pain behind her eyes robbed her of the ability to speak as she screwed her eyes shut once more.

“I have a small dose of Dreamless Sleep for you,” Healer Lucas said, holding another potion vial to Hermione’s lips. Gratefully, the wildfire inside her skull dulled, though the grief remained.

—

The next time Hermione woke, Ginny sat at her bedside. For a moment, Hermione’s head lurched, trapped once again between her past and present, trying to make sense of the scene in front of her. Thankfully, the subtle cue from Ginny’s hand resting against her

stomach told Hermione everything she needed to know. Present, not past. Reality, not memory.

“How do you feel?” Ginny asked, watching her carefully.

“Congratulations,” Hermione rasped, ignoring the question. “Harry told me.”

Ginny glanced down at her still flat stomach, thumb moving in a small, possessive circle. When she looked back up at Hermione, she had tears in her eyes. She lunged forward, encircling Hermione in a hug.

“I never want to have to watch you wake up in a hospital again. Do you hear me?” Ginny whispered, more of an order than a request.

Hermione allowed herself a smile, accepting the sense of calm and safety her friend offered.

“Did you just use your mum voice on me?”

“If it keeps you out of danger, absolutely.”

“What happened?” Hermione asked after clearing her throat, still blinking away some of the sleep from her eyes and mind. “Where’s Draco?”

Everything about Ginny’s posture shifted. Her relief snapped into tension, her joy into something fearful. She sat straighter against her chair. A crack began to form in the relief Hermione felt, foundations already rattled by the empty spaces that still lived in her head, now driven to a fissure under the sharp shift in the mood around her.

“Malfoy’s with Harry. They’re—with Theo. A lot has happened. I should call your healers now that you’re awake,” Ginny said, a hand back at her stomach in an act of self-soothing. Dread made its presence known in the dark corners of Hermione’s head.

Hermione reached out, holding her friend’s free hand.

“Draco first,” Hermione said.

Ginny looked hesitant just for as long as it took Hermione to give her hand a squeeze, barely enough pressure to say *please, I need this,* before she pulled out her wand and cast a Patronus, sending it galloping to find Draco with the simple message: “she’s awake.”

“I imagine the ferret will be here shortly, then,” Ginny said with a bit of a wry smile. “He’s barely left this room outside of when the healers force him to.” A pause. “Or when he’s with Theo.”

Ginny leaned in closer, a forced smile covering her concern. “He about broke in again when they woke you the first time. Harry barely managed to convince him that another potential assault charge wasn’t a good idea.”

Hermione found herself sinking back into her pillow, something oddly settling about the familiarity of that behavior, inadvisable as it may be.

“Rather predictable, isn’t he?”

“I think you mean nauseating. Besotted if I’m feeling generous, which I’m not. *You* haven’t had to deal with him this whole time. He’s been..."

Hermione nodded when Ginny’s words failed her. She could imagine, and the thought alone forced a painful turn in her stomach. The fact that her healers had done the same diagnostics they used in January suggested concern about her memory. And the thought that Draco had to endure the idea of potentially going through that again caused Hermione’s throat to tighten.

“How much do you remember?“ Ginny started at the same time Hermione asked, “how long have I been here?”

Both questions went unanswered as the sound of footfalls running through the corridor stole their attention. Ginny almost looked amused.

“That’ll be him,” she mused, giving Hermione’s hand a pat. “I’ll give you two some privacy.”

Ginny stood and, not a moment later, the door to Hermione’s room burst open.

The thing Hermione noticed, of all the things that vied for her attention, was that his hair fell in his face, dislodged by what had clearly been a hospital-wide sprint. He gulped for air as he paused in the doorway: a distinct repetition of a scene they’d lived once before. But no security emerged to pull him away this time, and as if he too just realized that fact, Draco launched himself across the room in three more enormous strides just shy of a run.

Hermione dimly registered the flash of red hair slipping out the door and closing it as Draco perched on the edge of her bed. He watched her with such crackling nervousness, such frantic relief, that she could nearly feel her own skin buzzing from the energy of it, static electricity jumping between bodies. He hesitated halfway through the motion of reaching for her hands.

“Your healers said you know the year, that you remember them,” he said. The fear in his voice was unmistakable. Beneath and between the words he actually said was the question he really meant: *do you remember me?* Her vision swam.

“Draco,” she said, and his name was all the proof he needed to believe what the healers had already assured him. He had her hands in his in the next second, head bowed over them as he dropped tiny, reverent kisses against her knuckles. She wanted nothing more than to run her fingers through his wild hair, to offer her own comfort, but she didn’t have it in herself to tear her hands away.

Hermione tried to swallow, a painful lump in her throat, tasting of failure, made the act nearly impossible. “I still don’t remember the rest,” she whispered, crushed by six years she’d thought for the briefest time she might actually get back.

“I know, they told me that too,” he said, lifting his head to look at her. He still held tightly to her hands and she couldn’t blame him. There was a part of her that felt like she might cease to exist in the absence of that connection. “We have a theory,” he paused, a small frown. “Well, Jenkins has a theory but that gives him a lot of credit and I don’t much care for that—"

Hermione let out a disbelieving laugh, tears she’d barely managed to keep at bay breaking free at the same time.

“I love you,” she choked, partway through a laugh and a sob. Draco didn’t even bat an eye, he simply scooted himself closer and reached to pull her into his chest, burying himself in the crook of her neck. He tangled a hand in her hair and wrapped another around her waist, pulling her close. Hermione alternated between inappropriate laughter over an offhand comment about Jenkins and gut-wrenching sobs over, well, most everything else.

Draco’s chest shook above her as he murmured against her neck, mostly unintelligible words that Hermione would have to accept by touch rather than sound. His voice came out raw and nearly as broken

as she felt when she finally heard him, “—didn’t know if I’d lost you again.”

She clutched him tighter. It became glaringly apparent, back in this place where it all began again for her in January, that she could never let him go. Memory or not.

“I’m sorry,” she said against his chest.

He loosened his grip and pulled away, just enough to look at her through the film of barely contained tears in his own eyes.

“Please don’t apologize,” he said, ragged. “You’re alive. And you remember the last year we’ve spent together.” He took a small breath, offering her a smile. “Which means I don’t have to convince you to love me again. Though to be clear, I’d have done it. As many times as I have to. But if you could please stop collecting head injuries, I’d appreciate it.”

Hermione laughed again, still a little watery, but sinking into comfort and safety in his arms, against his chest.

“Jenkins has a theory?” Hermione asked once the hammering of her heart slowed enough that she could hear the sound of her own thoughts. She didn’t miss how assigning credit to Jenkins caused Draco to stiffen, just by a fraction, but enough that the juvenile reaction gave her a smile.

“Based on what we pulled from the wreckage, yes.” The word *wreckage* rattled through her. What had been wrecked, and how badly? “It’s a good theory, explains everything and gives us some"—he stumbled over his next word in the way Hermione had once done nearly every time she had to say it—“hope. Real hope for you and your missing time.”

“How?” Hermione breathed the question, a sudden tightness seized her chest.

Draco smoothed away what she could only imagine was a matted, disaster of a curl from however long she’d been confined to her bed, drying her lingering tears as he did. He stood and relocated to the chair Ginny had used, moving it even closer to her bedside as he did so. He laced his fingers through hers, propping his elbows on the bed as he leaned forward, holding her hand to his lips.

“Before I potentially get either of our hopes up any more, why don’t

you tell me what happened to you in that room—confirm some assumptions we've been working off of." He dropped another kiss to her fingers and she saw the act for what it was: an attempt to put her at ease. Because beneath the gesture of affection sat something else, unease drawing deep creases across his forehead, flexing tendons along his neck, and sliding a tiny, guarded expression across his gaze.

—

"The room was a mess," she started. A pulse of pressure against her knuckles encouraged Hermione to continue. "You may have undersold the level of destruction we managed, honestly."

Draco gave her a tight smile, waiting for her to continue. His new reticence made her painfully aware of the feeling of her own pulse in her head, agitating the dull throb behind her eyes.

"I spent a few hours, if I had to guess, just sorting through everything in there. I was looking for the time turner I'd confiscated from Theo." The gentle pressure on her hand increased. Draco nodded, expelling a breath.

"I thought so," he said. He didn't say anything else.

"The sand from it was everywhere," she said. "I tried collecting and containing it. Gods, it felt like I spent days trying to arrange all the sand back into the glass casing once I found the turner."

Draco nodded with her words, enraptured.

"It was obvious I didn't have the tools I needed to do—anything with it, really. So once I had it relatively stable I tried to leave. I wanted to find you." It was her turn to exchange pressure through clasped hands. It felt important, irrevocably so, that he know she meant to include him, that she'd sought his input.

He dropped another kiss to her knuckles, his expression caught between laughter and disbelief.

"The room didn't let me leave," she said quietly. "It didn't exactly flip when I tried to open the door again, but it—jolted, I suppose. I assume the agitation mixed materials and potions that shouldn't be combined

because something started bubbling—I barely realized what was happening the fumes erupted so quickly."

Hermione struggled to remember, an echo of those fumes so noxious and vile in her mind, clouding everything. Her vision swam in another throb of pain.

"There were noises," she tried to explain, struggling to remember. "Pops and cracks—I think I knew there was real danger. And I could tell I was going to pass out from all the gas so I grabbed the box with Theo's illegal portkeys and picked one."

"You're brilliant," Draco said.

"Where did it take me?" Hermione asked. She'd reached the edge of her memory, everything else resuming in bright lights and lime green.

"Theo's bedroom," he said.

"Was Theo there?"

Draco let out a chuckle.

"So, there's some good news," he started. "Looks like Theo finally figured out Blaise was flirting with him. Unfortunately, you passing out and splitting your head open on the granite floor might have interrupted things."

"Oh gods," she groaned, her free hand lifting to cover her mouth out of shock and embarrassment and genuine regret.

"That was almost three weeks ago. Skele-groing a skull is lengthy and dangerous," Draco continued. "Theo brought you straight here, Blaise came looking for me at the flat. Harry was already there, sorting through the wreckage."

Hermione's stomach dropped. "What wreckage, exactly? What happened?"

"Most of the flat's been destroyed. There was an explosion from inside the guest room, only some far edges of the bedroom survived. Our wards kept it mostly contained to our unit, though Harry said he had to do quite a bit of emergency obliviation."

"And Harry was there? Right after it happened?"

Draco grimaced through an annoyed groan.

“He tried finding you after he left work, was worried about you. When he didn’t find you he put a trace on our wards because he had a *feeling.”* The derision in Draco’s tone might have been funny in a different conversation. “Auror suspicions and all that,” Draco continued, breaking hold on her hand to make a waving gesture as if to explain Harry’s motives. “So he knew as soon as you apparated back. It might have seemed like you spent hours in there but Harry arrived just after you did. And when he got there the flat was already on fire.”

Guilty tears prickled at Hermione's eyes.

“Merlin, what he must have thought…”

“Blaise got there just after he did so he didn’t have to think you were in there for long. I showed up a few minutes later. I’d just been wrapping up my potions before I could follow you.” He paused, forcing eye contact in a way that told her he would always follow her.

“I apparated into our living room. While it was on fire,” he finished. “Potter saved my fucking skin, quite literally. Twice now he’s saved me from burning alive.”

“I’m sure you’re extremely pleased about that,” Hermione said as a tease, but she reached out to touch his face, tracing blessedly unburned flesh, grateful in a way she couldn’t even describe for Harry Potter. She felt like she might cry again and she wasn’t sure she had the energy for it. She wanted to feel happy, to feel relieved, to banish her growing guilt to somewhere remote and unreachable: perhaps the empty spaces inside her head. The same place she’d hidden the dread that kept poking and prodding at her consciousness. Even now, she could feel it. Something she didn’t know that they’d yet to tell her.

“So what’s this theory then?” Hermione asked, dropping her wandering hand to hold his again, exchanging comfort for strength, traveling between them in a way they’d shared before. “I was working off the idea that when we flipped the room, we’d set Theo’s experimental time turner back six years. And then my injury later that month triggered it, in a way. Which is why I lost such a specific span of time.”

Draco sat back in his chair, crinkles at the corners of his eyes, smiling through what looked like tremendous pride.

“Of course you’d already figured most of it out,” he said on the tail

end of a low chuckle, looking at her with open astonishment and adoration. “It took Jenkins nearly a week, and that was after reviewing the initial report from the Unspeakables *and* my reminding him that my last conversation with you had to have meant something since you left in such a rush.”

“And you said there’s hope? To get my time back?” Breathing became exceedingly difficult as she waited.

“The Department of Mysteries has been studying Theo’s time turner. It was—surprisingly unscathed in the explosion. Theo’s meddling expanded the scope of what lengths of time it could affect, which is why it worked in years, not hours. I—I have a whole report for you to read when you’re ready, but we’re fairly certain you just need to catch up.”

Hermione’s hand had started to shake in his, an impending sense of discovery pickling at her nerves. She could barely contain the anticipatory jitters coursing through her.

“What does that mean, Draco?”

“Your brain essentially traveled six years in reverse, almost certainly separating memory from the most recent six in order to build new ones. But the Unspeakables, Jenkins, too—they’re fairly confident that once you’ve lived six years going forward, when your brain catches up, so to speak, that the separation and suppression won’t be necessary and—"

“I’ll remember.” The air carrying the words barely escaped the violent constriction in her throat.

“They think so,” he paused. “I do too, I’ve read the report. It’s—it’s good logic outside of the magical components.”

She couldn’t suppress her tears any longer. “I like logic.”

Draco laughed. With her, for her. “I know, love.”

“So,” she started, forcing words through a throat determined to strangle her alive. “All I have to do is wait? Until January 2013?”

Draco nodded. Six years. Up close, it felt like a lifetime. But from a distance, it was nothing at all.

“I can do that,” she said, overcome by the resurgence of hope inside

her chest, blooming in a field she'd expected to slash and burn in the absence of other options. Instead, she found life there, possibilities, *hope.*

Draco leaned in, finally kissing her after what she imagined had been an olympian exercise in patience and self-control, giving her time to process, giving her the answers she needed more than she needed him in that moment.

"Where the *fuck* is my best friend?" a voice demanded.

Draco pulled back, brows furrowed, as he tilted his head towards the door. Hermione watched too, almost wondering if she'd imagined the disturbance in the eery silence that followed.

"You're not stopping me Weasel, I *will* hex you," the voice screeched again. Hermione had to grip Draco's arm to keep from shaking in her sudden bout of laughter.

The door to her room burst open, revealing a livid Pansy Parkinson, somehow still an image of immaculate appearances despite the ferocity of her entrance.

"Quit your cuddling. This is my moment Draco," Pansy said, immediately inviting herself into the room, positioning herself at the foot of the bed.

Draco, who'd been hovering over Hermione, still in range for a new barrage of kisses, actually followed orders and backed away. He settled into the chair at her bedside with an amused smirk stretching across his face. "By all means Parkinson, have your moment with my wife."

Pansy huffed.

"They said you haven't forgotten anything else," she said. "But just to be clear and just in case, because I'm not waiting six gods damned months again: you are my best friend and I am your second best friend if we aren't including Draco or Potter, which I don't, obviously. So, you're not allowed to disappear again, okay?" Pansy finished with another huff, heaving a huge breath and crossing her arms in front of her.

Draco did not do a very good job suppressing his laughter. And even Hermione found the muscles at the edges of her lips twitching against the instinct to giggle. But beyond the obvious absurdity of everything

involving Pansy Parkinson, there was also something so disarmingly sincere about her tirade that Hermione, already strung out from her emotional ups and downs of the day, almost wanted to cry again.

“Pansy,” she said. “I know I’m your best friend. And if we’re not including Draco or Harry, or probably Theo too"—Pansy cut in with an agreeing *cocks don’t count* that almost burst whatever remaining brain cells Hermione had left—“then it’s probably fair to say that you’re actually tied as one of my two best friends.”

Pansy looked confused for a split second before she sucked in a tiny gasp. Then came the enormous, far too self-satisfied smile.

“Oh, excellent,” she exclaimed before a pause. “Well, feel better then, Granger,” she said, already turning to leave. “Weaselette,” she shouted into the corridor as she opened the door to let herself out. “Do you know what Granger’s just told me?”

Draco still had his mouth pressed together, trying to stifle his amusement as the door swung shut behind the production known as Pansy Parkinson. He had his brows raised, watching her with unmasked mirth.

“You may want to blame that on the head injury in the future,” he warned her.

Hermione sighed. “I was feeling generous.” She closed her eyes, paying her emotional debts with physical exhaustion. Not even Pansy’s interruption could derail the primary thought rolling around Hermione’s head.

Memories.

“Do you really think I’ll get them back?” she asked from behind her closed lids.

“I do,” Draco said and the confidence in his tone blanketed her, better than the threadbare version provided by the hospital. This was a comfort she didn’t even know she needed. It was nice to let him carry some of the hope for her, dosing her when she needed it most.

“When do I get to leave here?” she asked, lost to the blessed darkness of closed eyes and the sweet pressure of his hand in hers.

“I can find out while you sleep,” he said. “We’re staying at Nott Manor while the Aurors finish investigating and restoring what’s left of the

flat."

Not even the concern over how much of her home had been destroyed could pull Hermione from the slumber that tugged on her consciousness, offering relief from bright lights and headaches.

She squeezed Draco's hand in hers, feeling her vacancies filling with new hope.

"I'll have to apologize to Theo for ruining the mood," she mumbled through a tired giggle.

The sharp pressure against Hermione's hand returned. Her eyes popped open, sensing the shift immediately.

"Theo's not there," Draco said, voice tight. Hermione watched him holding his next words, a kind of uncertainty in his eyes as he decided whether or not he should verbalize whatever came next. He frowned and ran a hand through his hair, pulling the fringe away from his face.

Finally, he spoke. "He's been arrested."

Hermione's head spun, pain loping in great strides across the inside of her skull as she sat up too quickly.

"He's what?" she asked through a grimace and a groan. She needed another potion for the pain. Who knew granite floors, experimental time turners, and bright hospital lights could cause so much destruction inside one's skull?

Draco didn't answer her at first, offering comforting noises and trying to ply her back to a resting position. Only once he'd gotten her head back to her pillow did he answer.

"They held me for a couple of days, possession of an illegal time device. It looked like they might arrest you, too. They were throwing around all sorts of charges—I think the fact that you're, well, you is the only reason they debated it."

Draco let out a long breath and Hermione saw the genuine worry propelling it, the regret, the feeling of guilt so similar to the one in her own chest, like her ribs might crack and split.

"Theo turned himself in, said he'd hidden it at ours after we warded the room. He covered for both of us."

Hermione's fingers twisted in the blanket on her bed, slipping through the delicate pointelle pattern, entangling herself in something tangible to occupy her hands.

"Is he in Azkaban?" she asked.

Draco shook his head.

"Still in holding at the DMLE. Potter is working on it. I gave him carte blanche to pull the *I'm Harry Potter* card as many times as he needs to and I'll never say a thing about it ever again." Beneath the flippancy was a real concern. Hermione twisted the blanket tighter in her fist.

"He doesn't deserve this," Hermione whispered, needing tears this time and finding none. She'd dried out, an aching desert of guilt and worry.

"No, he doesn't," Draco agreed.

—

Eight days.

Healer Lucas discharged Hermione from St. Mungo's eight days ago with a full but tenuous bill of health and a new care plan that more or less boiled down to 'be patient for just over five more years.' And during those eight days, Theo sat in the DMLE awaiting formal charges. Harry provided the only silver lining in the situation through his ability to keep Theo stalled in the administrative machine at the Ministry that struggled to precisely agree upon the accused's offenses. Being Head Auror certainly had its privileges.

Which meant Theo was stuck, three floors somewhere above Hermione's miserable office. She could barely bring herself to focus on a single report from the mountains of proofreading she had to do. Only with another life-threatening injury and a weeks' long stay at the hospital did the value of her work find appreciation. Her boss, evidently, had not enjoyed reviewing reports in Hermione's absence.

Hermione proofread. She worried. She corrected errors. She worried more. She sent each report flying out her tiny office at an aggressive speed as soon as she finished with it. And then she froze, heart in her

throat, at the next report sorted from the masses.

Theo's temporary record of arrest, pending official charges and processing. On Hermione's desk sat the entire legal basis for Theo's continued holding: finding its way to her for a final, menial review. For a moment, Hermione heard nothing the blood rushing in her ears and thudding of her heart against her ribs. Theo's face smiled at her from his arrest photo, looking casual and disinterested and annoyingly caught between irreverence and benevolence. She wanted to throttle him for his complete lack of regard for his own self-preservation.

She sent a memo on its way to Harry as quickly as she could cast the spell to conjure the communicative paper airplane soaring. She'd have called for Draco too if there were a quick and inconspicuous way to contact him at his shop. But considering the direction her thoughts had turned, she wanted to avoid drawing undue attention to herself.

Hermione stared at the file while she waited for Harry to travel the three floors between their offices. She barely breathed as she read, half convinced the expansion of her lungs might finally crack her ribs. Possession of an illegal time device, tampering with an illegal time device, distribution of an illegal time device, and all of it under a heading announcing his familial ties to Death Eaters as if that fact alone were damning enough.

Hermione wondered if that's what Draco's Hogwarts applications looked like, lists of relevant information overshadowed by his past. She jumped at Harry's knock on her door.

"Memo sounded urgent," he said, letting himself in and closing the door behind him. If Hermione thought the last eight days had been difficult for her, they must have been a nightmare for Harry. He didn't look like he'd slept in all that time, with deep, dark circles evident under his eyes despite the glasses that obscured them partially from view. His messy hair had grown even more so, sticking up at such absurd angles that Hermione had to wonder if he even bothered with it in the mornings anymore. He'd thrown himself wholeheartedly and headfirst into helping her friend, helping Draco's friend, despite his own personal reservations. Because that's what came with the *I'm Harry Potter* card: unwavering loyalty and unquestioning action. Hermione couldn't love him more if she tried.

She held up the report for him to see.

He had almost no response. He just took the parchment, eyes roving

over the report.

“Yeah, this is the arrest report. What about it ‘Mione?” Harry sank into the corner chair. “I’m already pulling on every technicality I can think of to delay his charges and transfer to Azkaban, even if he *is* the reason you almost died in that room. Twice.”

“You can’t honestly blame him, Harry,” Hermione said, standing to snatch the report back from him. “Draco and I ruined that room experimenting with magic. The interaction with the time turner was an accident.”

“The time turner shouldn’t have even been there in the first place,” he said, voice low. “Do you have any idea how much trouble you could have gotten in for hiding that?”

“Probably less than when I robbed a bank you with Harry Potter,” Hermione shot back with her best *now is not the time to push me* face. Harry only sank deeper into the chair, perhaps appreciating a moment away from his office and the chance to unwind a small chunk of the tension he carried.

“What kind of error would have to exist in this report to invalidate his charges?” Hermione asked, sitting back down at her desk and staring at him with a blank, blameless expression. She could very well have asked about the state of the weather with the tone she’d used.

Harry blinked. He pulled his glasses from his face and dragged a hand from his temples to his chin.

“There’s nothing clerical that could make the charges go away. I’ve already looked into it,” Harry said with his eyes closed as he massaged his jaw.

Hermione’s thoughts flew through her head at an impossible rate, conjuring, sorting, and discarding ideas as they came to her.

“And if no report was filed at all? That would violate the validity of his extended holding, wouldn’t it?”

“I filed that report myself, ‘Mione—oh.” He caught her meaning just as she pulled out her wand. She paused, giving him the opportunity to dissent. He waved a resigned hand. “Go ahead. I don’t have any better ideas. I have a great record and I run the department. One botched arrest won’t be the end of me.” He almost looked pleased to have an option.

She set the parchment on fire without another word, watching as it charred and shriveled and turned to ash on the desk in front of her.

Harry stood. “Good thing the Ministry hasn’t discovered electronic filing. Muggle redundancies would have made that much more difficult.”

“Thank you, Harry,” Hermione said, rising to give him a hug. “You’re an amazing friend.”

“He was willing to go to Azkaban for you,” Harry said in response, a kind of disbelief coloring his words.

“He was.”

“And you just broke the law for him.”

“You helped,” she added.

Harry shook his head but he had a small smile curling at the corners of his mouth.

“Well I’m going to go throw myself under the bus,” he said. “Maybe it’ll be enough to get him released today.”

Hermione reached out. “I—Harry. Really, thank you. I know you didn’t have to do anything you’ve done for Theo. So—just, thank you. For doing it for me and Draco.”

He nodded, humble in the way only Harry could be. “Just make sure Nott knows that if he ever touches a time turner again I’m personally escorting him to Azkaban.”

—

Hermione collapsed onto what was probably an obscenely antique sofa in Nott Manor, wrapped in Draco’s arms, almost as soon as she stepped through the Floo.

“Have you heard from Harry?” she asked, voice barely above a whisper as Draco pulled her back against his chest, nuzzling into her curls, breath coasting across her neck.

“Nothing yet,” Draco said. He lifted a hand to pull her hair off the side of her neck, exposing skin he could explore.

Hermione let her eyes close, surrendering to something that wasn’t her new, ever-present anxiety over Theo. And from the way Draco’s hands carved paths across her skin with an urgent sort of pressure, he probably sought comfort in the same thing. She arched against him as one of his hands robbed her of her breath in the simple act of slipping beneath the hem of her skirt. These eight days since she’d been released from St. Mungo’s had been nothing but a haze in two parts: fear for Theo and love for Draco.

The floodgates, the barriers, and the caverns in her head. They all felt so meaningless when she finally stopped trying so hard to understand them and simply accepted that some things in her life could be instinct. And every instinct in her body hummed and buzzed under Draco’s praise and touch.

She felt weightless without the exhaustion of all her effort: effort to analyze her every feeling towards Draco, effort to unravel the mystery of her memory, effort to cobble together and salvage whatever she could of her past. In the absence of all that effort, she could just accept. Just over five years and the potential to remember? It didn’t feel like so long with Draco’s hands anchored against her hip bones, or his lips pressing a kiss to the tender line of her neck between throat and clavicle, or with the promise of his partnership creating placeholders in all her vacancies until she could have memories to fill them again.

And if January 2013 came and went without the revelations she hoped for, she wouldn’t be alone in figuring out what came next. So for now, the time she had with him would be enough.

“In my own gods damned home,” came Theo’s voice: shocked, appalled, and distinctly in the same room as them.

Hermione lept from the sofa where Draco’s wandering hands had wrinkled her clothes and left her looking disheveled. She crashed into Theo, wrapping her arms around him with as much force as she could muster. He seemed startled, unsure of what to do with his hands. His entire body tensed, but she didn’t relent.

Draco appeared behind them just moments later, clapping a hand on Theo’s shoulder while Hermione refused to relinquish her hold, a dam of tears filled to near bursting from her lids.

“Could I have a minute with Granger?” Theo asked.

Hermione finally broke her hug, in time to see Draco nod and disappear into the labyrinthian corridors of Nott Manor.

Theo immediately stepped away from her and began pacing. She hadn’t even looked at him properly yet. But now, seeing him traveling back and forth in rumpled clothing and looking a touch too pale and a touch too thin compared to his usual disposition, her heart clenched for him. That familiar feeling like her ribs might crack crawled up her spine, threatening to expand the scope of its damage.

Theo stopped, turned to her, and then his entire demeanor collapsed. He turned away, began pacing again, and then stopped behind an armchair. He bounced a closed first against the back of it, avoiding eye contact.

Hermione tried to take a step towards him but he jumped and began pacing again. He ran both hands through his short hair and made a strangled sound, something like a cough he’d tried to keep bottled in his lungs.

All of his nervous energy exploded out of him when he finally turned to look at her for a third time.

“I am so fucking sorry, Granger,” he said, voice catching on the vowels in her name. He pitched forward, finding stability against the armchair. “You could have died,” he croaked. “I could have killed you.” He wore none of the cool and collected confidence she’d seen in his arrest photo.

“I don’t blame you, Theo,” she told him, trying to speak softly but with as much conviction as she could sew into the fabric of her meaning.

“You should. You absolutely fucking should.” He wasn’t looking at her anymore.

She stepped into his line of sight, forcing eye contact.

“This is not up for discussion Theo. Neither Draco nor I hold anything against you. What you were willing to do for us—" It was Hermione’s turn for her words to catch.

“No, no. You can’t be upset. I’m the one who’s upset,” Theo lamented. Some of his panic ebbed under the comfort of a familiar teasing tone.

“How can I convince you that we forgive you?”

Theo seemed to consider her question for a time before he let out a shaky laugh.

“I supposed you could name your firstborn after me.”

Theo walked around to the front of the chair he’d been gripping for support, dropping into it with the same practiced flounce that Hermione had grown to love in the last year. She walked to the adjacent sofa and sat, tucking her legs beneath her. Theo still looked like a stiff breeze might send him tumbling, but she could see the effort to pull himself together.

“Is Theodore the name of a constellation I don’t know?” Hermione asked, trying to lull him into a mood a little more Theo-like with a bit of banter.

“Thinking about baby names, are you?”

Hermione shrugged, realizing the implications of what she may or may not have just admitted.

“Well, if we’re planning on dismantling the vast majority of Draco’s centurys' old family traditions, I suppose a silly naming scheme isn’t the worst one to carry on. It’s rather benign, all things considered.”

“Draco is a dumb name and you know it,” Theo said.

Hermione threw a pillow at him, but she couldn’t help her grin, feeling like she’d found Theo again.

Theo looked deep in thought. He countered, “I’d be willing to accept a godfathership.”

“You’d have to wait for the second born. Harry did sacrifice himself to save the lot of us that one time,” Hermione intoned with her best Draco inspired smirk.

“You drive a hard bargain for a Gryffindor.”

“And you’re amazingly brave, intelligent, and loyal for a Slytherin,” Hermione replied, sidestepping his teasing and opting for something a little more sincere.

Theo seemed to consider her sudden compliment, chin resting on the arm he had propped on the side of his chair.

“Want to know a secret, Granger?”

Hermione smiled. “Of course.”

“The only reason I ended up in Slytherin was because I begged to be put there, practically shouted at the hat in my head.” He paused, caught in a memory. “Father never would have forgiven me if I’d gone anywhere else.”

“Where did it want to put you?” she asked, thinking of her own hat stall and near brush with Ravenclaw.

“Privileged information like that is a bargaining tool, Granger. I’m not giving that away freely. I’m not entirely ill-suited to my house, you know.”

Hermione reached out suddenly, holding his free hand in hers. “I’m glad I know you now, Theo,” she said, feeling a bit wobbly and emotional.

He squeezed her hand. “I’m glad I know you too, Granger. I’d even be willing to let you and Draco live here permanently I like you guys so much.”

Hermione laughed.

“Our flat is almost restored, so you should consider yourself lucky you won’t have to walk in on us anymore. Besides, you just want to keep Crookshanks.”

“Guilty,” Theo admitted. “But please don’t turn me in for catnapping. One incarceration was more than enough.”

Hermione burst into laughter, followed by a stream of startled, stressed tears.

“Too soon?” Theo asked.

—

“Potter really wouldn’t tell you why he wanted to be here?” Draco asked as Hermione apparated on his arm to the sidewalk outside their flat.

“Couldn’t get a word out of him,” Hermione admitted as Draco held the door to the building open for her. She was apprehensive in a way she hadn’t been until the moment they arrived on the block. She hadn’t seen the damage done to their flat, but she’d heard enough. Restoration services will have repaired any structural concerns and made the space livable again. But their belongings, the memories she’d spent ten months building in that flat, they’d be gone, save for the far edges of the bedroom where the explosion didn’t reach.

On their floor, Hermione spotted Harry and Ginny waiting by the door to their flat. Hermione greeted her friends with a hug. Draco offered Harry a firm handshake and, to Hermione’s great surprise, a friendly kiss on the cheek to Ginny.

“What, no insults?” Hermione asked, eyes wide, expecting jabs about pointy facial features or offensively red hair.

Harry laughed. “They don’t do that when Gin’s pregnant. Apparently Draco refuses to insult pregnant women.”

Hermione’s gaze shifted from Draco to Ginny and back to Draco again. The man simply shrugged.

“It gives me nine months to work on new material,” he said with casual hands resting in his pockets and a not too subtle wink at Ginny, who just rolled her eyes.

Harry evidently had no patience for whatever weird rituals their spouses engaged in and instead pulled a key from his pocket.

“We have a gift for you. A welcome back home gift,” he said, a grin growing in sync with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

“When on earth have you had time for that, Harry?” Hermione asked as he slid the key into the lock. He turned the handle, pausing as he cracked the door just enough to drive a sudden thrill of anticipation into the corridor.

“I run an entire department at the Ministry and in a few months Gin and I are going to be outnumbered by our children. I’m never going to get sleep again, this is just practice.”

And with that, he let the door swing open.

Draco entered first, mouth agape.

Hermione followed, a hand covering hers.

“Is that—” she started.

Ginny giggled from the corridor behind them. Harry actually guffawed.

“That’s the sofa,” Harry said in between gulping breaths and breaks in his laughter. “Hermione’s antique Malfoy Estate relic.”

The entire flat was empty as far as Hermione could see, apart from the sofa, somehow sitting in the same place it always did, giving off only the faintest charred odor.

Ginny made a sort of groaning noise in the background. “I think I can still feel the hangovers I’ve woken up with on that thing.”

Hermione put a pin in that sentence for later; she’d definitely need more clarification on whatever that story entailed.

Draco’s mouth still hung wide open.

“We were told most of our property was blown up or burned,” Hermione said as a question. To perform a restoration spell would have required a substantial portion of the original material.

“I spent a lot of time supervising the initial investigation after the accident. I found a decent sized chunk of the frame, figured I’d try finding enough to restore it.” Hermione rotated to look at Harry, stunned. She couldn’t figure out if he realized how gargantuan a task that must have been, surely he did, he’d done it after all. But still, he’d said it like it was nothing.

“But,” Draco started through his shock. “Why is it *red?”*

Harry doubled over in another fit of laughter. Ginny clutched at his shoulder, propping herself up as she laughed, too. Even Hermione struggled not to break down into a fit of giggles.

“That,” Harry said. “Is some of the finest velvet money can buy—Blaise Zabini of all people helped import it from Italy. He was quite eager to assist, actually. Unfortunately, the original fabric was ruined and I had no choice but to replace it.”

Draco already had his wand out, but Hermione surged forward, laughter still tickling at her like little pinpricks of light. She stepped

between her husband and the sofa, trailing her hands down his left arm: bicep to forearm to wrist to fingers, prying his wand away and returning it to his pocket.

“It’s my understanding that this piece of furniture belongs to me,” she said, a smile wide. “And I don’t know that I’d call it *red* anyway. It’s more an inoffensive burgundy.” She turned to Harry and Ginny, who were both stifling smiles and trading congratulatory glances. “I love it, thank you,” she told them.

“And Malfoy looks like he might hex me, so we’ll be going,” Harry replied with an easy smile, looping his arm around Ginny. Hermione still had her fingers twined with Draco’s, halting whatever color changing spell he’d been about to unleash on their lovely new Gryffindor-worthy sofa.

Draco’s eyes dragged from the piece of furniture, around the otherwise empty flat, and to where Harry and Ginny stood. His fingers pulsed against Hermione’s for a beat before he spoke.

“Thanks, Potter,” he said. “For this. And Theo. And pulling me out of here while it was on fire. You’re irritatingly well suited to saving the day.”

Harry nodded. “Happy to help, Malfoy.” He offered another conspiracy-laden grin to Hermione before tossing the house key in their direction, which Draco caught easily, even with his right hand. When Hermione looked up again, Harry and Ginny had closed the door to the flat behind them, a faint *pop* announcing that they’d apparated away.

Hermione turned to Draco, wrapping her arms around his middle.

“All my books,” she whispered into his shirt, taking a quiet moment to mourn in the emptiness of their flat. He laughed against the top of her head.

“I know,” he said, sounding nearly as disappointed in the wake of his amusement. “Mine too. Your copy of the Count of Monte Cristo survived though, it was in my bedside table.”

It was a small thing that felt enormous. Or perhaps, a huge thing that felt minuscule. But either way, Hermione held him tighter, grateful to still have a few precious things like this in her life.

“And just think of all the space we have now,” Draco continued, hands

gliding up and down Hermione's spine as he held her. "All this empty space and we can fill it with whatever we'd like."

"Like memories," Hermione breathed. "And children."

"Only when you're ready," Draco said, placing a kiss to the top of her head, muffled by her hair.

"Did my bedside table survive too?" she asked, looking up at him.

He blinked, clearly thrown by her question. "It did."

"My planner is in there, then," she said, feeling some of her courage waver. She dropped her head back against his chest.

His hands had stopped moving along her back. "If you left it there, then yes, I suppose it is." His statement sounded like a question he was trying to work out inside his head.

"I had some things planned for this week," she said.

"Oh?" he asked, a cautious coating around the single syllable.

Hermione summoned the small, leather-bound book. She leaned away from Draco to find the pages for that week, pages she'd visited just days before she managed to blow up their apartment. Because even then, deep in the trenches of their disagreement over her memory and startlingly prepared to wade out into no man's land with him, Hermione had already started planning for the possibilities.

She held the book open, handing it to him.

In red ink, penned in her own hand and underlined for emphasis was a single word: sex.

"You planned sex?" Draco asked, that same caution covering every word he spoke, careful and contained and so obviously smothering his hope that it almost made Hermione want to laugh.

She didn't answer. She just looked up at him, arching a brow as imperiously as she knew how.

"Are you sure?" he asked, some of his caution wavering.

"I am," she said, shifting her arms from his waist to his neck, demanding a kiss.

He complied, briefly, before lifting her off the ground far too effortlessly as he carried her to the newly restored red velvet sofa. Hermione couldn't help the giggle that escaped as he dropped her on it, already sinking atop her, kissing along her jaw.

"What? Here?" she asked, torn between more laughter and jumping straight into tearing his clothes off.

"Do you see any other furniture?" he asked with a familiar smirk. She laughed again, loving the ease of that moment, forgetting the things she'd forgotten and thinking only of their future.

Once, in an Italian vineyard with his hands on her skin, alight from what felt like a star powering her heart and pumping desire through her veins, she'd thought about how together they might make a constellation.

That day, in that place, they did.

Chapter End Notes

> i love and appreciate kudos and comments if you feel so inclined to let me know what you think!! also, come hang out with me on tumblr, its a good time!

Chapter 12: Scorpius and Cassiopeia Malfoy

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"There is neither happiness nor unhappiness in this world; there is only the comparison of one state with another. Only a man who has felt ultimate despair is capable of feeling ultimate bliss. It is necessary to have wished for death in order to know how good it is to live…the sum of all human wisdom will be contained in these two words: Wait and Hope."

— Alexandre Dumas, The Count of Monte Cristo

—

December

2012

Hermione adored Christmas. In particular, she adored Christmas at Hogsmeade Village, blanketed in a fresh powdery snow so perfect she suspected magical meteorological interference. Not that she minded in the slightest. She watched the snow sparkling in the predawn light of dim streetlamps as she relaxed in a living room *finally* unpacked and organized after nearly six months in their new home.

Even with magic, moving became much more complicated with children. Especially when extensive book collections were involved. Which, between her books and Draco's, a veritable his and hers library, their collection could certainly be termed extensive, bordering on excessive.

The sound of Draco's soft footfalls pulled Hermione's attention from the window. He looked barely a blink out of sleep, soft and rumpled and endearingly disheveled in a way he'd only grown into in fatherhood. That very same disheveled appearance often made Hermione reconsider the hard two-child limit they'd placed on their family after witnessing the sustained chaos that became the Potter household following Lily's birth.

“I don’t think I’ve woken up before you in years,” Hermione told him in a whisper as he slid beside her on the velvet sofa. “Actually, I don’t think I’ve been up before you for as long as I can remember,” she amended. She set her tea aside and leaned in for a kiss, melting against him in the blessed fragments of silence and solitude their sleeping children offered them. She knew it would be a brief, ephemeral moment.

“I couldn’t bring myself to wake you when Cassie started crying again,” he mumbled against her mouth, clearly still drowsy.

“I made tea,” Hermione said. She ran her hands through his messed hair, brushing it back into something resembling his usual style. It caught her in moments like that, when Draco seemed his most human, just how distractingly handsome she found him, just how much she could love him.

He frowned.

“I’ll make my own,” he said, standing. He glanced back at her. She had her head tilted in question. “There’s a reason I always make the tea, love,” he said, twisting and lowering himself to soften the blow of his words with a kiss. “Yours is terrible.”

“My tea tastes just fine,” she insisted, unsure if the fiery feeling in her chest came from indignation or amusement. “I can’t even tell the difference from what you made yesterday.”

A familiar smile flashed across his features, one she didn’t see often anymore. It was the smile that said they’d had this conversation at least once before.

“Yes, well, your palate is clearly underdeveloped. Mine is not, however.” He stole her cup as he distracted her with another kiss. “I’ll make yours fresh, too. One of us must have standards.”

Draco only made it halfway to the kitchen before a four year old blond blur barreled into his waist.

“Christmas, it’s Christmas!” Scorpius announced, bouncing with the energy and enthusiasm only a child on Christmas morning could maintain. His tiny hands grappled at Draco’s shirt, begging to be picked up.

Hermione glanced at the clock; one day, in the distant future, she could envision a life where Scorpius slept past sunrise. But in the

depths of a Scottish winter, she knew an impossibility when she saw one.

Still holding Hermione's tea in one hand, Draco managed to stoop and lift Scorpius around his middle, hauling the child into his arms. He grunted. "Scorp— buddy, I think you might be getting too big for this."

Hermione watched as Draco set her tea on the counter and engaged both hands in holding their son, who already looked bored and ready to bound to another destination, sliding from his precarious perch. Draco let him go. Complain as he might about their four year old being too big to pick up, Hermione could see Draco imminently mourning the loss. Scorpius ran to her on the sofa.

"Time for presents," he announced, practically climbing on top of her. She smoothed the blond waves away from his face.

"Hush darling, your sister is still sleeping," she told him, pulling him in for a hug.

"Is there a kitty?" Scorpius asked, struggling to look around. He'd been asking for a cat since the moment they'd lost Crookshanks the year before.

"We've talked about this Scorpius. We're not getting a cat right now," Hermione told him.

Scorpius wrenched himself from her arms, pouting with a look so similar to his father that Hermione had to suppress a laugh.

"But I want a kitty," Scorpius whined as Draco joined them, fresh tea in hand, settling onto the sofa. Hermione could only lock eyes with her husband who blew out an exhausted breath.

"Uncle Theo and Uncle Blaise will be here soon and we'll do presents then. They're bringing their cat for you to see, isn't that exciting?" Hermione said.

Scorpius huffed, still pouting through the surge of excitement he clearly didn't want his parents to see.

Hermione took a sip of her fresh tea; it tasted exactly the same as the cup she'd made before. But she smiled in gratitude at Draco, a silent thanks he met with rolled eyes.

“It’s better,” he insisted.

“It’s the same,” she said as she returned her attention to the squirming child between them. “After we do presents we’re going to go see your grandparents for lunch. And no one will be receiving ancient human bones as gifts.” She flashed a teasing grin at Draco.

“It was one time, Granger. And you don’t even remember it.”

She laughed, reaching across Scorpius to find Draco’s hand. Scorpius wriggled from beneath her arm, sliding to the floor. He turned, looking at them with a pointed sort of authority Hermione blamed entirely on the Malfoys.

“After we see your grandparents we’re going to go up to the castle for Christmas dinner with your daddy’s new work friends. And you’ll be on your best behavior, won’t you Scorpius?”

“Only if I get a kitty,” Scorpius grumbled, arms crossed in front of him.

Draco snorted, reaching out and ruffling the waves Hermione had just smoothed. “This isn’t a negotiation, bud.”

Scorpius frowned, engaged in a momentary battle of wills with his father, and then threw himself to the floor where a number of his toys immediately offered a new focus.

“What time were my parents expecting us?” Hermione asked Draco as Scorpius distracted himself with a toy snitch.

Draco shrugged, stifling a yawn. He pulled out his wand and summoned the cell phone he used to communicate with her parents. He fumbled with it briefly before tossing it aside on the sofa.

“Eleven,” he answered, winding an arm around her shoulder and pulling her close.

“You know, I found my old phone when I was unpacking the bedroom. I could probably take over some of the logistics with my parents,” she said, sinking against him as she watched a stuffed toy bludger bounce off the back of Scorpius’s head with a soft thump.

She felt the tension ripple through Draco’s core.

“You have that phone? The one from before your accident?”

She nodded, looking up at him to search his face for whatever had caused that unexpected reaction.

“Have you used it—since then?”

“No,” she said. “I haven’t even charged it since—maybe a month after I got out of St. Mungo’s. Why?”

Slowly, a flush of pink crawled up his neck. “Well,” he started. “Why don’t I get Scorp dressed and you can power it up?”

She furrowed her brows, questioning. Draco dropped a kiss to her temple.

“I assumed we lost it in the fire.” He paused, drumming fingers against his leg, working out a sudden reticence. “I taught myself to text. I used to talk to you on it—when things were hard. In the beginning. It helped. I figured you saw it and didn’t say anything—or never saw it and it was destroyed.” The pink creeping up his neck flushed deeper, a rosy red beneath his fair skin.

When Draco steered Scorpius back to his bedroom to change for the day, Hermione located the phone she’d almost entirely forgotten for years.

And when she held the old electronic device in her hands, freshly powered from the complicated merging of magical and muggle required to run even the tiniest bit of electricity to their Hogsmeade home, she nearly dropped it as hundreds of messages swarmed her.

I love you.

I miss you.

I almost killed Ron fucking Weasley tonight.

I’m not allowed to be mad at you.

But I am. I’m so upset with you.

You can’t stand me.

Merlin, I miss you.

You looked so pretty today.

I just want to kiss you.

I miss you.

You gave me a gift today.

I love you.

I'm not giving up.

You called me handsome.

I think you hate me.

I didn't tell you about trying for kids.

You're breaking my heart.

I know, I'm being dramatic.

You're in the bedroom right now.

I just kissed you.

I almost came in my pants.

It would have been worth it.

Gods you're beautiful.

We're going to figure this out.

I'm going to get your memories back for you.

I will.

I love you.

And so on and so on and so on.

It twisted and tangled and tore at her heartstrings, uncertain if she should feel grief or joy or guilt or love. Evidence of a thing he went through just as she did, only from a different perspective, a different context. Her shoulders shook, tears pouring, hands trembling as she had to set the phone down. Strong, familiar arms wound around her from behind.

"I didn't mean to make you cry," he said against her ear.

"It's behind us," she said, leaning into him. "I love you." Whether she

said it out loud or she simply thought it with enough force, she didn't exactly know. She couldn't hear the sound of her own voice over the roar in her head.

The green flash of the Floo flaring to life in the other room, coupled with an excited squeal from Scorpius, put an end to whatever emotional spiral had just captured them. She turned, wiping her eyes. "I love you," she said again, or for the first time, or for the thousandth. It felt the same.

"Go ahead and change. I'll wrangle Theo," she told him, struck suddenly by a sense of inevitability in the thing between them. In a life planned to its far edges, she found comfort in the surrender to such an easy inevitability.

She found Theo outside Cassie's door.

"She's in here?" he asked in greeting, already cracking the door open.

"She's sleeping," Hermione exclaimed in her best forceful whisper, throwing an arm across the door frame, blocking his path. "Don't you dare wake my sleeping baby, Theo. Are you mad?"

"Well, as her godfather I must champion for her in all things. And seeing as it's her first Christmas, I'm not letting her miss a moment of it."

"She's ten months old, Theo. She's not going to remember whether or not we woke her the instant you got here. We'll get her up for presents if she's still—"

Theo ducked under her arm and pushed the door all the way open at the sound of Cassie's cry: a punch to Hermione's stomach that simultaneously made her heart twist with a mother's concern while also considering the ethical implications of using a silencing charm on her own child. Theo, on the other hand, couldn't look more pleased to hear Cassie cry so long as it meant he was allowed time with her. Which was an ethical question in its own right.

But she could hardly fault him for his enthusiasm. There were few things Hermione imagined that could compare to the sight of one of her dearest friends loving her daughter as fiercely as Theo loved Cassie. He had her in his arms, shushing and rocking, before Hermione had even crossed the threshold into the room.

Cassie's shrieks continued despite Theo's best efforts as they moved to

the living room where Scorpius sat enamored with the cat currently avoiding him.

“He likes it best when you let him come to you,” she heard Blaise telling Scorpius from his designated chair beside the fire. She and Draco had purchased the matching ottoman specifically to protect their coffee table from Blaise’s pathological need for lounge-adjacent seating positions.

Theo looked stricken as the baby in his arms continued to cry, always desperate for Cassie to enjoy every moment she spent with him. Hermione rolled her eyes, mostly out of how precious it was, and summoned a bottle from the kitchen. She handed it to Theo. “She’s probably hungry again. Try this.”

Draco appeared behind them, dressed impeccably as if he hadn’t just been delightfully rumpled and sleep-deprived minutes before.

“Is Cassie awake?” he asked, a smile in his voice as he took a seat on the velvet sofa.

“What gave it away?” Hermione replied as she sat next to him.

“My goddaughter is perfect. I don’t appreciate the implication that her early aptitude for operatics is unbecoming.”

Hermione smiled as Theo avoided joining them on the sofa. Instead, he settled in the other armchair near the fire.

A sharp *crack* caused everyone in the room to jump, apart from Blaise, who merely blinked. Scorpius scrambled away from where he’d been sitting near Blaise and wedged himself between his parents, staring bug-eyed at the house elf that now stood on their coffee table.

“I is leaving this for the lady of the house,” the elf announced, placing a heavy parchment envelope on the table. The elf vanished in another loud *crack*.

Hermione immediately turned to Draco, who looked like he might vomit.

“Was that—" Theo started.

Draco gave a sharp, singular nod. He swallowed, his adam’s apple dragging a long line down his throat as he stared at the envelope on the table.

Scorpius lept from the sofa and grabbed the delivery. He stared at it, putting together the letters Hermione taught him in most of their free time.

“This is your name,” he said with a proud smile, delivering it to Hermione.

Draco looked pale, perhaps a little greenish, as he watched the letter transfer hands from Scorpius to Hermione. She wasted no time opening it. Between the stunned adults and the restless children, she didn’t have the luxury of careful consideration.

The envelope contained a letter and two documents, all bearing the official Gringotts seal.

Her hands shook as she tried to keep Scorpius’s grasping fingers from finding the parchments as she read at a record setting pace. Draco eventually found his motor functions again, pulling Scorpius away.

“It’s—" her voice caught. She felt a little faint. “It’s a complete dissolution of your trust account,” she said, casting a glance at Draco. “And the creation of two new ones. For Scorpius and Cassiopeia.”

“What’s for me?” Scorpius asked.

“Give us a minute, Scorp,” Draco said through a strangled voice.

Blaise rose suddenly. “Scorpius, let’s try and find that cat again, shall we?”

Between Theo’s loving fondness, Draco’s deep affinity, and Hermione’s tremendous appreciation, it would have been impossible to determine who was more grateful for Blaise Zabini in that moment.

With Scorpius occupied, Draco spoke. “We can’t take their money. What do they want?” His words traveled low and serious in the space between them, carrying an undercurrent of fear.

“There’s—there’s no strings.” Hermione had to swallow, fighting the painful tightness in her throat. She passed the letter to Draco. He scanned it quickly.

“They’ve made *you* the executor of the accounts?” Draco asked, utterly dumbfounded as he looked to Hermione.

“They *what?”* Theo asked from across the room.

“They can’t touch the money,” Hermione said.

“There are no conditions,” Draco added, reviewing the letter again. Equally as much a question as it was a statement.

Hermione allowed herself a small, disbelieving smile.

“For our children,” she breathed, eyes finding Draco’s.

Another sharp *crack* caused her to jump again. Cassie let out a wail as Theo engaged in his best efforts at soothing her.

The elf set a box of candies on the table. “These is for the master of the house,” it squeaked before vanishing again.

As if sensing the presence of a candy, Scorpius ran back into the living room. Draco looked downright comatose staring at the apple flavored taffies that normally—*only*—ever arrived on Hermione’s birthday.

Oblivious to the fact that candies were not breakfast foods, Scorpius launched into his tactics for acquiring one.

Hermione sank to her knees on the floor beside him, reaching for the apple taffies.

“I think because it’s Christmas your daddy won’t mind sharing these with you,” she told him. Her chest felt concave, collapsing on itself in sympathy for her husband who didn’t seem capable of speech. “These are special candies, Scorpius.” She pulled one from the box and twisted at the paper wrapper, offering it to him. “These are the kinds of candies that a mother gives her son to say she loves him very much.” She paused. “Even when they disagree.”

Scorpius popped the candy in his mouth and grinned at her.

“Like when you said we can’t get a new cat.”

She pulled him into a hug, ignoring the sticky chewing sounds against her ear. She looked up at Draco. “Among other things, darling.”

—

“I think,” Hermione started, exhausted from a long day of Christmas

festivities and the struggle known as bedtime in their household. “Minerva McGonagall might actually *like* you a little bit.” She settled onto the sofa next to Draco. They’d barely had a moment alone together since the early hours of the morning. “She seemed quite pleased with your work. She even told me she didn’t regret letting Harry convince the Board of Governors to hire you.”

“Did she?” he asked. He had his attention focused on the letters from Gringotts sitting atop the mantel, voice sounding distant as he humored her conversation. In any other setting, he would have needled her for more information, seeking more praise, bathing in compliments and confidence.

“I used the potion,” he said suddenly, entire body shifting towards her. “After I put Cassie down for a nap earlier today. Before dinner.”

“You—what?” Hermione asked. He’d coiled, muscles tense, everything about him on the verge of running or hiding or perhaps finally breaking free from something that held him back.

“The potion,” he repeated. “My potion.”

Carefully, he unfastened the cufflinks on his left shirt sleeve. Hermione couldn’t tear her gaze from the precision in his fingers, the way he threaded metal through cotton with a deft, practiced control. Even with the realization of what was coming, she found he couldn’t quite breathe.

He rolled the cuff: once, twice, three times. Finally revealing a pale, perfectly unmarred stretch of skin. Hermione couldn’t help herself; she reached for it, tracing the place where the Mark used to brand him.

“You had it half your life,” she said in summary of the obvious that somehow felt more important than all the rest.

“Not now that it’s gone,” he said. “Every day it’ll be less than half. I didn’t—I didn’t want to worry about my students seeing it. It was—time to forget it.” He didn’t exactly sound relieved, but rather, stuck.

Hermione looked towards the fireplace, towards the documents that sat atop it.

“And we got that gift from your parents today,” she added.

He nodded.

“You didn’t let him win, you know,” she said, hands still running along his forearm. “I thought you meant Voldemort, the first time you told me why you hadn’t removed the Mark yet. But you meant him, didn’t you? Your father?”

Another nod, followed by a breath that shook as he released it from somewhere deep in his chest.

“I don’t think it was ever really about winning or losing with him,” he said, winding one of her curls around his fingers, watching her with the same reverence that stole her breath every time she saw it. Even now, having seen it so many times before. “Just moving on.”

Hermione abandoned her memorization of new, blank skin in favor of locking eyes with her impossible, improbable gift of a husband. She found a familiar whirlpool there, rotation in a degrading orbit, a kaleidoscope in liquid metal, melted just for her.

“We’ve gotten quite good at that,” she said. “Moving on. Together.”

—

For the second morning in a row, Hermione rose before her husband, who’d insisted on handling Cassie’s latest bout of fussiness. She didn’t bother with the tea, opting to let him have his idiosyncrasy if it made a difference to him. Instead, she spent her time sitting at her kitchen table and doing something she found peaceful and pleasant: list-making.

“What’s this?” Draco asked as he dropped a kiss on the top of her head, fingers casually trailing across the back of her neck before he began busying himself with tea. Proper tea, apparently.

“Just feeling a little nostalgic,” she said. “Grateful mostly—for what we have.” She paused, watching as he moved through the kitchen, preparing tea in an easy routine she rarely got to witness first hand.

“Because next month is six years?” he asked, a break in his movements as he watched her.

She hummed an affirmative noise. “I was just making a list, people in our lives who we owe some thanks to—for that first year.”

Draco moved to stand behind her, chin resting atop her curls as he peeked at the names in her planner.

“Ronald Weasley is on your list?” he asked, incredulity evident in the way he huffed a light laugh and squeezed her shoulders with a sort of possessiveness she doubted he even realized he’d engaged in.

“I needed to see him to know,” she said simply. “That dinner was an awful time but I had to see him again to realize that I’d already let him go.” She leaned against Draco’s chest behind her head.

“I wouldn’t advise telling Theo you have him on that list,” Draco said.

“I know, but how could I not? He’s the only one who refused to coddle me while the rest of you treated me like glass.”

“At least the Weaslette’s inclusion makes sense,” Draco mused as one of his hands dipped from her shoulder, trailing little lines of affection down her arm.

“Ginny was indispensable,” Hermione agreed. “But do you know what came to mind first? She mentioned something about planning for kids, which was how I realized we’d been doing the same. Then you and I had that fight.”

He stiffened against her, lazy paths paused along her arm.

“We needed to have that fight,” she continued. “It changed everything, I think.”

She could hear the grimace in his muttered acceptance of her logic.

“I suppose Pansy earns her spot for letting the matter of my disinheritance slip?”

“Exactly. And your mother is on here for those candies,” his grip on her shoulder tightened. “I was almost out of hope the first time you told me about them. They helped.”

“Might as well add a third Weasley to that list and include George for infecting me with that fucking confetti.”

Hermione laughed, accepting his diversion towards something lighter. She reached over to hold the hand he still had paused against her arm.

“I think you might be reaching with that one,” she said.

“Don’t tell me our little talk about all of Theo’s toys in that guest room didn’t get your brilliant brain turning long before you put all the pieces together.”

Hermione considered. It was a bit of a stretch, but she added George’s name to the list regardless. She quickly added the next one as it came to her.

“Blaise, of course,” she said wiggling the fingers on her left hand. Her ring caught the soft light from the fire in the adjacent room; a beautiful warm glow to match the red stone and gold band. “Who knows when I would have asked about it without his push.”

Draco stepped away from her just long enough to gather the tea he’d prepared, setting it on the table as he lowered himself into the chair next to her. With zero sense of subtlety, he dragged his chair as close to her as he could. He walked his fingers along the top of the table, stopping on her planner which he then dragged closer to him, settling it between them.

Then, as if it were a completely normal way to sit with someone, he leaned down to hook her legs beneath her knees, twisting her so that her legs draped over his own and she sat sideways, bridged between their two chairs.

She swatted at his hands that immediately began climbing from knee to thigh along her flannel pajama bottoms.

“You’re ridiculous,” she laughed. “I’m not finished with my list.”

He loosed a dramatic sigh and, as an unspoken compromise, removed one hand from her thigh, leaving the other firmly in place, massaging heat through fabric, straight to flesh.

“Abraxas Malfoy,” he declared.

“Abraxas Malfoy?” she repeated. “Your grandfather?”

“Indeed. If we’re giving away gratitude based on whatever we’d like then I think my grandfather ought to have a place for his part in acquiring our favorite piece of furniture.”

She knew he meant it as a joke, a logical fallacy ad absurdum he knew she’d struggle to ignore. Instead, she smiled.

“Abraxas gets his spot,” she agreed with him, adding the name. “So

long as Harry gets his.”

Draco groaned with the good-natured obligation of a lifetime rivalry long since laid to rest.

“Must we?” he complained, playing his part. Hermione leaned over in her strange perched position to kiss him.

“Of course we do,” she said as she pulled away, still savoring the soft warmth of his mouth. The heat beneath his hand on her thigh grew, radiating outward. “He saved your life.”

“Barely.”

“Almost certainly. And he protected Theo.”

“Technically.”

Hermione couldn’t take the heat from his hand on her leg any longer. She swung her legs back in front of her, ignoring the pathetic noise of disappointment Draco made as she shifted again, completely abandoning her own chair in favor of his, straddling his lap. The disappointed noises ceased immediately. He wrapped his hands around her waist, placing a light kiss on her clavicle. He released one of his arms, grabbing the planner and holding it between them.

“You know who’s missing from this list?” he asked. “You and me. I think we deserve a little credit.”

She’d already forgotten about her list of names, instead favoring her attentions on his jaw, lips traveling the hard line that helped make him so striking. "I didn’t do anything,” she mumbled against his skin.

He jerked away from her.

“Surely you’re joking. You survived. You gave me a chance, let me prove myself to you.” The arm he still had wound around her waist tightened. “And then there’s the matter of the two beautiful sleeping children you’ve given me.”

“Then I think you deserve credit for giving them to me, too,” she whispered, hands holding his face, watching his outrage on her behalf, savoring the fierceness with which he defended her, even from her own understatement. She kissed him, noting the sound of her planner hitting the floor as his other hand tangled in her hair.

“Are you nervous about next month?” he asked in air they traded, capturing her bottom lip between his teeth before she could answer.

“Yes,” she breathed against him. “No. I don’t know. Are you?”

He pressed his mouth to hers again, a taste of tongue and teeth and tenuous hope.

“About the same,” he admitted as she sucked in a breath, finding oxygen alarmingly scarce between them.

“If the memories return, I must say I do rather like the idea of knowing what it’s like to fall in love with you twice,” she admitted through a pant, rolling her hips against his, tasting the shape of his groan.

She had fire in her veins, flames licking at her nerves, and an inferno burning away every errant thought that might distract her from the taste of his lips and the feeling of his fingers dragging against her skin.

“And if the memories don’t return,” he said, trailing a path of kisses towards her ear. He continued in a low voice, hot against her neck. “I’ll finally buy you that pensieve.”

She laughed, loving him and the things they’d weathered together.

Wanting for her memories, but needing nothing.

Chapter End Notes

other art inspired by this story:
Portrait by doodleladi
On the Green Sofa by jaxx-in-a-box
Sofa Cuddles by flyora
Draco, Hermione, and Crookshanks on the Sofa by pacific-rimbaud
Pregnant Hermione with Draco on the Sofa by felixfelicis
Crossover Art with Remain Nameless Universe by eternallyreadinggoodthings
Draco with Hermione, Crookshanks, and the Count of Monte Cristo by dragonlyart
Embroidery by camelotsatelier

UPDATE: there are now several additional stories in the w&h universe!
Beginning and End, a Draco POV prequel to w&h. (complete)

Sight and Seeing, a Theo POV companion to w&h. (complete)
Picked and Planted, a Pansy POV post w&h one shot. (complete)
The Couch Collection, a collection of ficlets centered around our favorite piece of furniture. (wip)

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i'm not crying, you're crying. actually no, i'm definitely crying. THANK YOU so, so very much for reading this story and going on this journey with me! I could never have predicted such a phenomenal response to the very first thing i've ever posted here! And now, 46 days and nearly 100,000 words later, it's done.

our adventures in the world of w&h aren't done just yet! keep an eye out for some spin offs in the future and keep up to date with what i'm working on over on my tumblr.

Thank you again, seriously, so very much! I'd love to hear your thoughts in the comments, as always. And kudos are lovely too!

End Notes

places to find me on the internet linktree links!

Works inspired by this one

Wait and Hope by nayshv

Wait and Hope- Traduzione Italiana by Emune

Cover for "Wait and Hope" and "Beginning and End" by mightbewriting by Amiril

[Restricted Work] by Beatificbean, ETL_Echo_Audiobooks

A Chance to Choose by forgotten_traveler

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!